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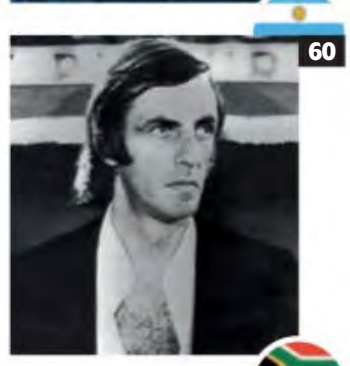

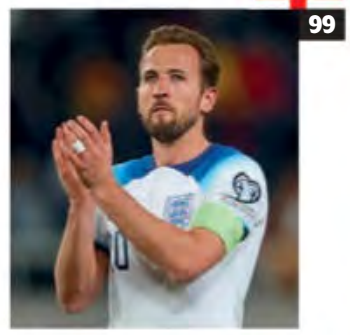

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Spain...Athletic Club parade their Copa del Rey trophy through Bilbao after winning their first Spanish Cup since 1984

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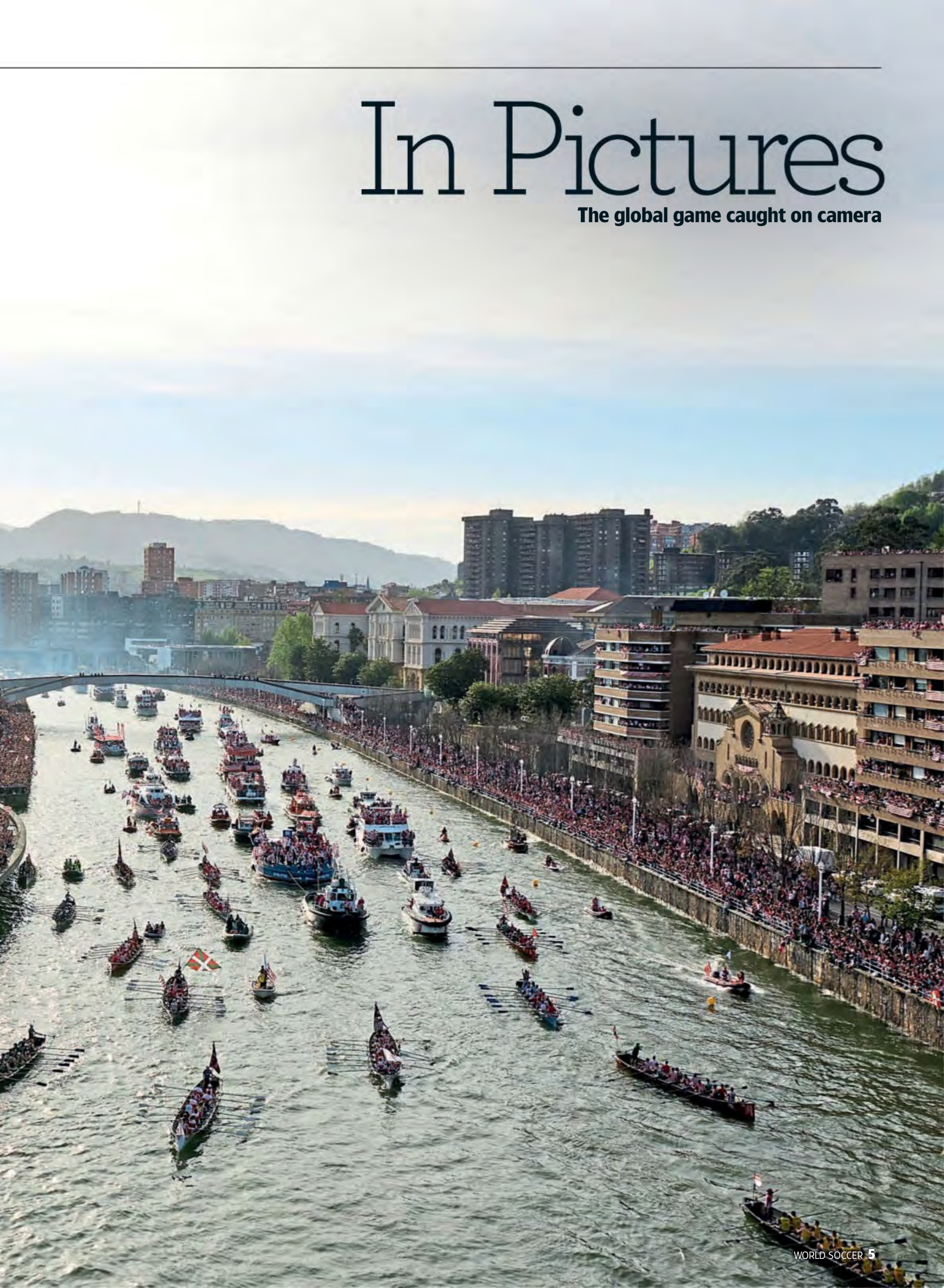
The global game caught on camera



Portugal...Sporting striker Viktor Gyokeres lifts the Portuguese league trophy after firing his team to the title with 29 goals

England...the roof of Old Trafford leaks a deluge of rainwater onto the seats below after Manchester United's 1-0 home defeat to Arsenal

Netherlands... Feyenoord boss Arne Slot holds up the Dutch Cup, his last trophy before replacing Jurgen Klopp at Liverpool

Germany...Marco Reus sings with the Dortmund supporters after playing his last-ever game at the Signal Iduna Park

Italy...supporters of Internazionale celebrate their team's 20th Serie A title win

Germany...fans of Bayer Leverkusen invade the pitch after confirming their first-ever Bundesliga victory

Morocco...players of RS Berkane react after being given a bye to the final of the CAF Confederation Cup *(more on page 21)*

Qatar...two young Japan fans celebrate their team qualifying for this summer's Olympics after winning the Under-23 Asian Cup *(more on page 86)*

Brazil...Gremio's Estadio Beira-Rio under water, after floods hit the state of Rio Grande do Sul, causing two rounds of the Brazilian league to be suspended as well as some Libertadores and Sudamericana ties

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Argentina...Gaston Campi celebrates scoring a late winner for San Lorenzo against Liverpool in the Copa Libertadores

Egypt...Mohamed Abdelmonem celebrates scoring in Al Ahly's African Champions League semi-final win over TP Mazembe *(more on page 76)*

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FROM THE EDITOR

Every so often, something happens in European football that makes the rest of the continent sit up and take notice. This year, that thing was Bayer Leverkusen.

When we profiled their coach Xabi Alonso in our September 2023 issue, and then placed the focus on the club itself in March, it was with a degree of scepticism as much as admiration. As well as praising the Basque coach and his team, we wanted to pinpoint exactly when and how the wheels would fall off. After all, in a league that had been won by the same team 11 years in a row, it was surely only a matter of time before they were reeled in by Bayern Munich. The idea that Leverkusen might go all the way to the Bundesliga title still seemed unlikely; that they might do it unbeaten, while also sealing a league-cup double and reaching a Europa League final, seemed like the imaginings of a fantasist.

Yet at almost every turn, Leverkusen proved their doubters wrong. Do not let defeat to Atalanta in the Europa League final detract from the facts: Leverkusen have just produced one of the most remarkable seasons in the history of European football, and Alonso one of the finest coaching performances.

Bayer Leverkusen have just produced one of the most remarkable seasons in the history of European football, and Alonso one of the finest coaching performances

We'll have a full review of their incredible 2023-24 campaign – plus a full round-up of Europe's other biggest leagues, as well as the Champions League, Europa League and Europa Conference League – in next month's issue, but it would have been remiss of us not to give them a tip of the hat before diving headfirst into a packed summer.

Football barely gives us a moment to catch a breath at the best of times, and the upcoming months will be no different as the European Championship kicks off in Germany while the United States plays host to the Copa America.

Both tournaments are sure to be packed with intrigue and drama. After last month's Euro 2024 Special (which you can still buy – see page two), in this issue we've taken a closer look at the players that could light up the tournament, previewed the 2024 Copa America as the ten footballing nations of South America head north in what will serve as a valuable dress rehearsal for next year's Club World Cup and the main event in 2026, and picked the brains of our network of experts to get their predictions for both tournaments.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

UEFA

Europe's Club World Cup quota complete

Red Bull Salzburg will be Europe's 12th and final team at next year's expanded Club World Cup. The Austrian outfit will join Chelsea, Real Madrid, Manchester City, Borussia Dortmund, Bayern Munich, Paris Saint-Germain, Porto, Benfica, Internazionale, Juventus and Atletico Madrid in the United States for the first edition of the finals in its new format.

UEFA's 12 slots went to the last four winners of the Champions League, with the other places based on clubs' records in the competition over the past four campaigns. With each country – with the exception of outright Champions League winners – limited to just two representatives, Red Bull Salzburg took the final spot.

Ironically, Salzburg's qualification came after they missed out on their domestic league title for the first time since 2013, as Sturm Graz beat them to the Austrian Bundesliga crown.

FIFA

Domestic games could go overseas

FIFA have agreed to establish a working group to assess the impact of domestic matches being played in foreign countries.

The governing body has previously opposed any such move, strongly opposing the Premier League's infamous "39th game" proposals in 2008 and blocking an attempt for an Ecuadorian

"UEFA want referees to explain more of their decisions…we ask that all teams ensure their captain is the only player who speaks to the referee. We ask the captains to ensure team-mates do not encroach upon and surround the referee"

UEFA explains its latest refereeing directive for Euro 2024

Europe's 12th club…Red Bull Salzburg in the 2023-24 Champions League

league game to be played in the United States in 2019. But, after the matter was raised at the latest FIFA Congress (more on page 18), a group of ten to 15 individuals with experience working in clubs, leagues and supporter associations will be formed to "gather further information and issue recommendations".

The Premier League say they have no plans to play games abroad, but La Liga will revisit previous plans to take fixtures overseas. In 2019, a league match between Barcelona and Girona, due to be held in Miami, was cancelled.

SPAIN

Xavi leaves Barcelona

Barcelona performed another managerial U-turn by sacking head coach Xavi just a month after convincing him to stay. In January, the former midfielder announced that he would quit at the end of the season, only to change his mind in April after conversations with club president Joan Laporta. However, that decision was reversed ahead of the team's final game of the season.

At the end of May, former Bayern Munich and Germany coach Hansi Flick was appointed to replace Xavi.

Barcelona farewell…Xavi

The month in numbers

Eye-catching facts and stats from the world of football this month…

50 not out…Bayer Leverkusen fans mark their 50th unbeaten game in a row

51
Matches Bayer Leverkusen went unbeaten in all competitions, a run brought to an end by Atalanta in the Europa League final.

16
Years and 180 days, the age of Everton's Issy Hobson when she became the youngest goalscorer in Women's Super League history.

66
Career hat-tricks scored by Cristiano Ronaldo after he netted a treble for Al Nassr against Al Wehda in the Saudi Pro League.

2
Times Australia will have staged the Women's Asian Cup after they were awarded the hosting rights for the 2026 edition.

11
Consecutive years Bayern Munich's Kingsley Coman had won a league title before Bayer Leverkusen's 2023-24 Bundesliga victory.

104
Premier League goals conceded by Sheffield United in 2023-24, a new league record.

63
Premier League games it took striker Erling Haaland to score 60 goals, also a new record.

21
Years since Como last played in Italy's top flight, a run brought to an end after they finished as Serie B runners-up in 2023-24.

20
Real Madrid goals scored by David Beckham, a record for an Englishman, before Jude Bellingham surpassed the tally.

12
Minutes that it took Luis Suarez to score a hat-trick in Inter Miami's 6-2 win over New York Red Bulls. Lionel Messi had a hand in every goal, scoring one and assisting five.

7
SheBelieves Cups won by the United States Women's team after they lifted the 2024 trophy, beating Canada on penalties.

1
Leagues in UEFA's top 30 according to coefficient to reject VAR, after clubs in Sweden opted out of adopting the system.

56
Penalties taken in a play-off shootout between SC Dimona and Shimshon Tel Aviv from the Israeli third tier, helping to set a new world record.

25
Years since Ajax last had a foreign head coach following the appointment of Italian Francesco Farioli from Nice.

8
Goals Newcastle United shipped in a post-season friendly defeat to an A-League All Stars team in Melbourne.

2
Australian clubs to have won an Asian continental trophy after Central Coast Mariners lifted the AFC Cup, ten years after Western Sydney Wanderers' AFC Champions League win.

AFC Cup winners… Central Coast Mariners

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

Coaching, culture and Coverciano

Why Italy continues to produce some of the finest coaching minds in football

There are two names on the list when Pep Guardiola identifies the greatest influences on him as a manager. One, unsurprisingly, is Johan Cruyff. The other is Carlo Mazzone.

Outside his native Italy, the likely response of most football fans to that name would be: "Carlo who?" Yet, in his own country, and for players like Guardiola, Andrea Pirlo and Roberto Baggio, there is no doubt: Mazzone is one of the legendary coaches.

Mazzone didn't win any big trophies, nor did he claim any personal prizes. But he does hold the all-time record of 792 matches as a manager in Serie A, working at 12 different clubs between 1968 and 2006, and guiding some of the greatest stars of his day. When he died last year, Guardiola spoke with rare emotion about his boss at Brescia, the man he called "The Master".

The esteem in which Mazzone was held by players and supporters alike symbolises a crucial element of Italian footballing culture: huge respect for head coaches. And it is this culture that lies at the heart of Italy's seemingly endless production of top managers.

Five of the nations at Euro 2024 have Italian coaches – Belgium, Turkey, Slovakia and Hungary as well as Italy. Four different Italian first-team bosses have won the English Premier League – Carlo Ancelotti, Roberto Mancini, Antonio Conte and Claudio Ranieri – compared to not a single Englishman.

In *World Soccer*'s list of the 30 most-demand coaches, published in May, five Italians were name-checked, including Roberto De Zerbi, Thiago Motta and Francesco Farioli.

All of which leads us to ask: why are there so many Italian coaches? And why are they so good?

Of course, each manager has his own backstory, but the starting point for almost all is the teaching they receive at the famed Coverciano coaching school, situated just outside Florence. It is an unrivalled factory, where the greats of the past like Arrigo Sacchi and Fabio Capello come to inspire new generations. They are open to ideas from everywhere – David Moyes, for example, told me it was a huge honour to be a guest speaker there.

Influence...Italy currently provides some of the finest coaches around

At the heart of the education is tactics. This is an Italian obsession, debated at length every day in three separate sports papers. And there is as much reverence for defensive strategies as attacking ones.

A word you hear very often in football parlance in Italy is "suffering". Teams have to suffer, as must fans. It is a culture of the game, which understands that managers will suffer as well as succeed, and probably learn more in adversity than glory. This means coaches are not written off as no-hopers from one bad experience, as often happens in England. They can fail and go again. They are given time and space to learn.

An example of the moment is Daniele De Rossi, who had a tough, brief spell in his first managerial job with SPAL in Serie B last season, but which didn't prevent Roma appointing him to replace Jose Mourinho.

De Rossi is also an example of another key factor in the production line of Italian coaches – that they are given the chance at a young age to work at a high level in their own country.

Very few non-Italian head coaches are hired in Serie A; instead it is full of newcomers like De Rossi and Motta, scheming and cajoling alongside veterans like Stefano Pioli at Milan, and Claudio Ranieri, who recently helped Cagliari avoid relegation.

There is widespread respect for these veterans, and although respect doesn't prevent them getting the sack after a run of poor results, it does remain with them for as long as they keep working, just as it did with Carlo Mazzone.

Who is the best of them right now? For the fans of new Italian champions Internazionale there is no question. Current boss Simone Inzaghi, a head coach for eight years, clearly inspires his players and is creating a team with modern attacking exhilaration allied to intelligently robust defence. What more do you want?

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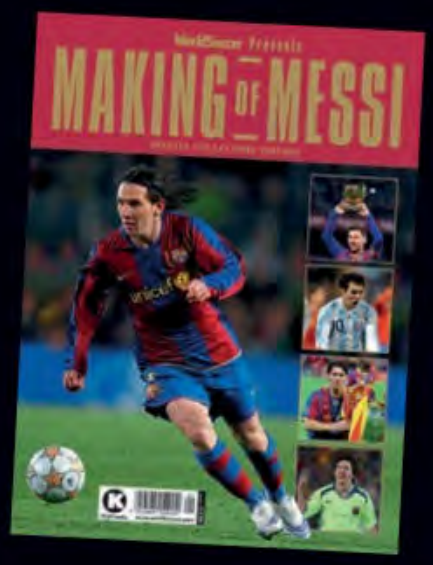

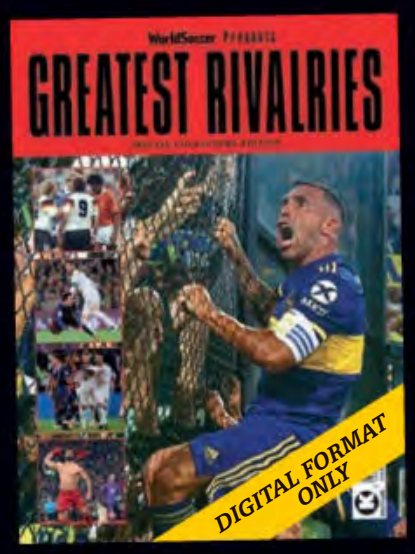

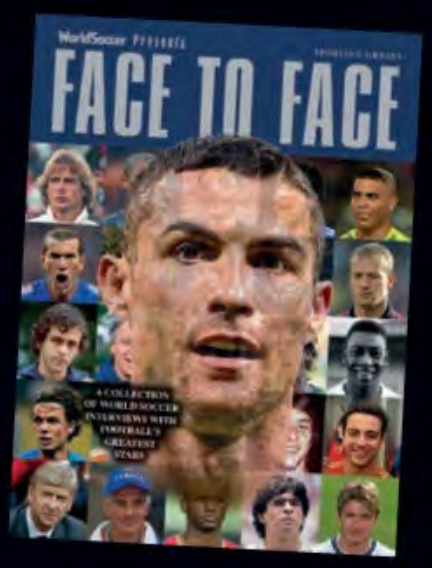

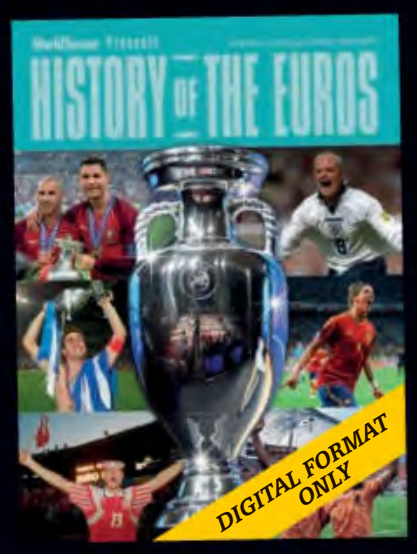

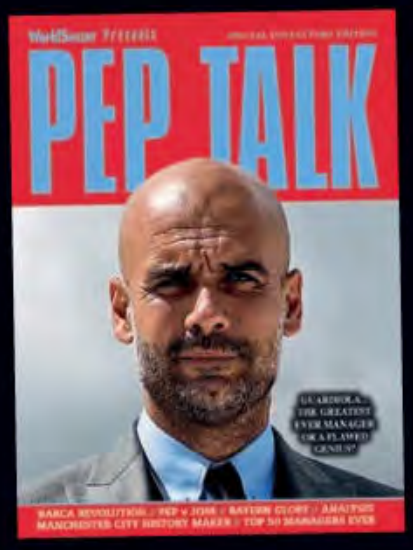

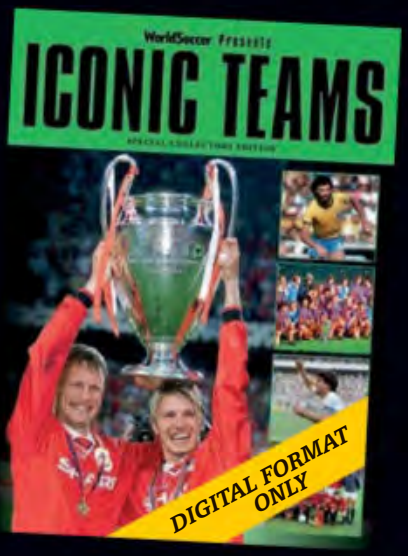

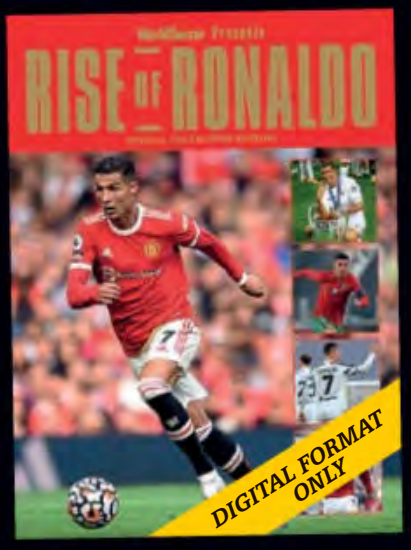

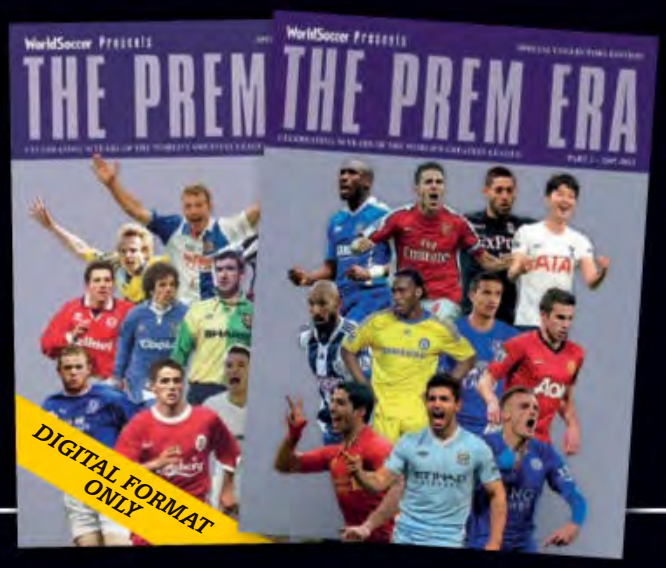

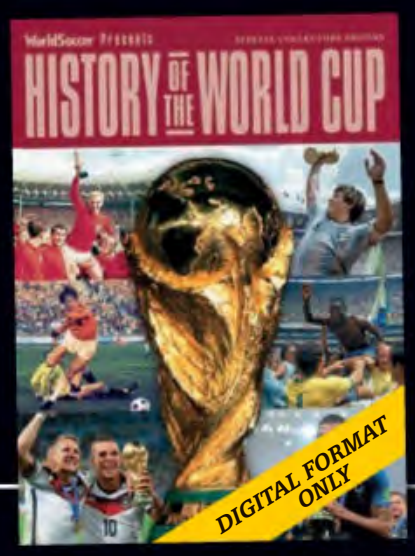

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"With Marcus, I just feel that other players in that area of the pitch have had better seasons, it's as simple as that…Hendo's a fantastic professional. That was a really difficult call to make"

England manager Gareth Southgate explains the omissions of Marcus Rashford and Jordan Henderson from his Euro 2024 squad

EURO 2024 SQUAD WATCH

Shock France recall for Kante

2018 World Cup winning-midfielder N'Golo Kante is the surprise name in Didier Deschamps' *Les Bleus* squad for Euro 2024

● FRANCE

One of the biggest surprises of all the Euro 2024 squad announcements was **N'Golo Kante** being recalled after last playing for France back in June 2022. PSG youngsters **Warren Zaire-Emery** and **Bradley Barcola** were also picked, but injury ruled out **Lucas Hernandez**, while **Axel Disasi**, **Matteo Guendouzi** and **Moussa Diaby** were all omitted.

● ENGLAND

The headline from Gareth Southgate's squad announcement was the surprise omission of experienced stars **Jordan Henderson** and **Marcus Rashford**. **Eberechi Eze** and **Adam Wharton** were rewarded for their sparkling end-of-season form for Crystal Palace by making the provisional 33-man squad.

● NETHERLANDS

The absentees from Ronald Koeman's Dutch squad included midfield pair **Marten de Roon** (injured) and **Mats Wieffer**, while Brest goalkeeper **Marco Bizot** and Bologna striker **Joshua Zirkzee** also failed to make the cut.

● CROATIA

Zlatko Dalic's 26-man squad was largely predictable, though he took a chance including forward **Ivan Perisic**, who missed the majority of the season with an ACL injury. **Luka Modric** will make his fifth Euros finals appearance.

● SPAIN

Luis de la Fuente's provisional 29-man squad featured a couple of big surprises in the form of uncapped duo **Fermin Lopez** and **Ayoze Perez**, but **Isco** and **Jose Gaya** missed out through injury. Meanwhile, **Pau Torres**, **Pedro Porro** and **Marco Asensio** were all omitted.

● PORTUGAL

Cristiano Ronaldo and **Pepe**, aged 39 and 41 respectively, were included in what could be their final international tournament, while Roberto Martinez also selected wingers **Pedro Neto** and **Francisco Conceicao** at the expense of **Ricardo Horta**, **Pedro Goncalves**, **Francisco Trincao** and **Bruma**. Al Hilal midfielder **Ruben Neves** was preferred to Manchester City's **Matheus Nunes**.

● HUNGARY

After missing Euro 2020 through injury, Hungary's talismanic captain **Dominik Szoboszlai** was named in Marco Rossi's squad. Little-capped **Krisztofer Horvath**, **Botond Balogh**, **Marton Dardai** and **Mihaly Kata** made the cut with **Zalan Vancsa** and **Krisztian Lisztes** on standby.

● BELGIUM

Goalkeeper **Thibaut Courtois** was left out of Domenico Tedesco's 25-man Euros squad, while there was also no place for perennial supersub **Michy Batshuayi**. There was a surprise recall, however, for 35-year-old **Axel Witsel**, who had announced his international retirement last year.

Red Devils returnee …Axel Witsel last played for Belgium at the 2022 World Cup

● SERBIA

There were shocks aplenty in Dragan Stojkovic's squad, with centre-backs **Nemanja Stojic** and **Uros Spajic** preferred to **Strahinja Erakovic** and **Erhan Masovic**, while full-backs **Milan Gajic** and **Aleksa Terzic** were left out entirely. Young Red Bull Salzburg striker **Petar Ratkov** and Sparta Prague winger **Veljko Birmancevic** were also included.

● SWITZERLAND

Switzerland coach Murat Yakin named a 38-man training squad, which included star striker **Breel Embolo** in the hope that he can fully regain match fitness after a long-term ACL injury. The party also included 100-plus capped stars **Xherdan Shaqiri**, **Granit Xhaka** and left-back **Ricardo Rodriguez**.

● UKRAINE

Vitaliy Mykolenko was included in Serhiy Rebrov's Ukraine squad, despite suffering an ankle injury towards the

"It's something different to play every three days or four days during a tournament, so this is the last information that we took into consideration, that he is not ready for the Euros"

Belgium head coach Domenico Tedesco explains the omission of goalkeeper Thibaut Courtois from his squad

"He's back to full fitness. With his experience, I'm convinced that the French team will be stronger with N'Golo Kante"

France coach Didier Deschamps

Back for *Les Bleus*... N'Golo Kante arrives for France's Euro 2024 training camp after his surprise recall

end of the season for Everton, but young striker **Danylo Sikan** and attacking midfielder **Oleksandr Pikhalyonok** were overlooked.

● ALBANIA
Albania boss Sylvinho made some big calls, leaving out experienced striker **Sokol Cikalleshi** – who subsequently retired – and winger **Myrto Uzuni**. Midfielder **Amir Abrashi**, a survivor from their Euro 2016 squad, earned a shock recall, while uncapped midfielder **Medon Berisha** was also included.

● GERMANY
Borussia Dortmund's **Mats Hummels** and **Julian Brandt**, and Bayern Munich pair **Leon Goretzka** and **Serge Gnabry** (injured) all missed out on the hosts' squad, while **Timo Werner** also failed to make the cut due to injury. **Manuel Neuer** returned to the fold for the first time since 2022, while **Toni Kroos** will bow out from the game after the finals.

● SLOVENIA
The big story from Matjaz Kek's preliminary 30-man Euros squad was the inclusion of former Atalanta forward **Josip Ilicic** after more than two years out of the international picture.

● SCOTLAND
Injuries forced Steve Clarke to leave out right-backs **Aaron Hickey** and **Nathan Patterson** from his squad, which was already weakened by the absence of **Lewis Ferguson**, recently named Serie A Midfielder of the Year. The main talking points from his provisional 28-man squad were the call-ups of wingers **James Forrest** and the uncapped **Ben Doak**.

● ITALY
Azzurri boss Luciano Spalletti named a preliminary 30-man squad with the main omission that of Euro 2020-winning midfielder **Manuel Locatelli**. Those included and likely vying for a final squad place comprised defenders **Giorgio Scalvini**, **Riccardo Calafiori** and **Raoul Bellanova**; midfielders **Samuele Ricci**, **Nicolo Fagioli** and **Michael Folorunsho**; and attackers **Stephan El Shaarawy**, **Mattia Zaccagni** and **Riccardo Orsolini**.

● ROMANIA
Romania coach Edward Iordanescu suffered a blow with the news that midfielder **Vladimir Screciu** was ruled out of the Euros, and subsequently left him out of his provisional squad.

● POLAND
Aston Villa right-back **Matty Cash** was left out of Poland's provisional 29-man Euros party after suffering a calf injury.

● SLOVAKIA
An ankle injury ruled centre-back **Lubomir Satka** out of Francesco Calzona's provisional 32-man squad, while experienced winger **Robert Mak** also failed to make the list.

● GEORGIA
Left-back **Irakli Azarovi** was left out of Willy Sagnol's final squad, while 18-year-old midfielder **Gabriel Sigua** replaced 38-year-old **Jaba Kankava**.

● CZECH REPUBLIC
After missing the entire qualification campaign through injury, star striker **Patrik Schick** was named in Ivan Hasek's Euros squad, while **Vladimir Coufal** and **Jan Kuchta** were recalled having been previously dropped.

● AUSTRIA
Captain **David Alaba** did not make Ralf Rangnick's squad after failing to recover from a torn ACL, while injuries also ruled out goalkeeper **Alexander Schlager** and midfielder **Xaver Schlager**.

● TURKEY
Notable absentees from Vincenzo Montella's 35-man party included Rangers left-back **Ridvan Yilmaz** and Fenerbahce winger **Cengiz Under**. West Brom midfielder **Okay Yokuslu** was recalled after more than two years in the international wilderness.

Denmark hadn't announced their squad as of our print deadline, while all provisional squads were to be trimmed to 26 players by June 7. Full squad lists, including shirt numbers, will be published in our August issue.

Squad details correct as of 29.05.24

Scotland shock... Liverpool's Ben Doak has been promoted from the Under-21s

EUROS REVIEW
✓ The FULL STORY from Euro 2024
✓ Every single match REVIEWED
✓ Every team ANALYSED
ISSUE AFTER NEXT: ON SALE AUG. 2

Keir RADNEDGE
THE INSIDER

The autocratic Infantino

This year's FIFA Congress did little more than outline the president's absolute authority

Autocratic Infantino...the president addresses the 74th FIFA Congress

Nothing to see here. That was the message emanating from the 74th FIFA Congress in Bangkok.

FIFA talked to itself through its press releases and social media channels, but no one in world football's super-glued governing body dared an official face-to-face engagement with the outside media world. Hence, fans may have missed the event. Its debates and decisions did not make waves around the world, not even the sporting world and barely even the football world. This is partly because no debates of any significance took place.

Debates, under the presidency of Gianni Infantino, are not needed. After all, who would dare show any sign of dissent, particularly among the 70 per cent of national associations who depend entirely on FIFA largesse for their existence, survival and continuing subsidised competitive presence amid the diverse plethora of World Cups?

> No FIFA president has ever enjoyed such power as Gianni Infantino

No FIFA president has ever enjoyed such power as Infantino, the man who rose to the political pinnacle in 2016 by happy accident. His accession to the top job was a surprise even to Francois Carrard, the man in charge of the reform committee created by Sepp Blatter a year earlier in response to the FIFAGate scandal.

Carrard was a Swiss lawyer who had earned a reputation as a peerless sports law fixer in the 1980s by helping Juan Antonio Samaranch turn the International Olympic Committee from a quirky Lausanne-based event organiser into a world sporting powerhouse.

Carrard died in January 2022 and left a largely contentious memoir, *By The Way* (Chiselbury Publishing), which has just been published. In it, Carrard describes how Blatter contacted him "as a total surprise" in July 2015 to chair a hastily-created commission to redraft the FIFA statutes.

On arrival in Zurich, Carrard discovered the self-protective FIFA executive committee was one step ahead of him. It had already appointed to the commission two members from each of the six confederations. Carrard saw members of the FIFA staff "tense and fearful" and considered the besieged Blatter as "isolated and lonely."

Crucially, as events have proved, time constraints denied Carrard his demands for a couple of highly-regarded independent additions to the commission and another proposal for an independent advisory board. He also failed to persuade the exco to delay a vote on the reform proposals from an extraordinary congress in February 2016 until 2017.

Carrard's conclusion in the reform report suggested the proposals should be "the beginning of a new era for FIFA." It was, but in a manner prompted by "a totally unanticipated development." This was the translation of Infantino from mere commission member to FIFA president. Carrard, diplomatically, does not say as much, but clearly, Infantino's role in helping draft the new statutes opened his eyes to how they could be managed.

Carrard's "reformers" had envisaged the president being reduced to figurehead, but that never happened. Instead, Infantino, elected in March 2016, quickly established himself without demur as executive president.

Infantino wields more power and control over world football than any previous president – including World Cup founder Jules Rimet, including the iron-fisted Joao Havelange and certainly including Blatter, who was always at the mercy of a gang of power-hungry vice-presidents from Asia and the Americas.

Last year, Infantino oversaw FIFA's revenue total $1.17 billion, much of which is split among the 211 national associations who can also avail themselves of million-dollar development project support. Simultaneously, Infantino's FIFA has not only stretched the multiplicity of senior men's, age-group, women's, futsal and beach soccer tournaments, but expanded their qualifying systems and the number of finalists. As many countries as possible can share in the fun and the funding which is only, after all, fulfilling FIFA's core mission to develop football around the world.

Bangkok, therefore, apart from the always-complaining Europeans, would have been deemed a happy congress by Infantino. No serious debate, but decisions aplenty:

- *The 2027 Women's World Cup was awarded to Brazil (more on page 70).*
- *A new women's calendar was approved (2026-2029), including the long-promised Women's Club World Cup in early 2026.*
- *A five-point anti-racism campaign was revived (rules and sanctions, action on the pitch, criminal charges, education, and players' voice).*
- *Qatar was handed the FIFA Arab Cup hosting in 2025, 2029 and 2033.*
- *The committee system was expanded from seven to 35.*
- *Palestine's latest push for Israel's suspension was kicked into the long grass of a legal review.*
- *Infantino's long-time Swedish adviser Mattias Grafstrom was confirmed as secretary general.*
- *The proposal of an Under-15 football festival, open to teams from all member associations.*

Plenty, then, for Infantino to celebrate in the traditional president's press conference? Not a chance. Infantino eschewed the opportunity once again. Basically, he has finished with the irritating nuisance of attempting to justify himself, his work and his reported $4.6m salary to the outside world via the international media.

Critics might console themselves with the thought that the three-term limit on FIFA presidents will bring an end to Infantino's autocratic reign by 2031. They should think again. On the eve of FIFA Congress, the Asian Fooball Confederation scrapped its three-term limit on presidents and their acolytes. Where the AFC led, so other confederations may follow and, ultimately, FIFA itself.

Francois Carrard might turn in his grave.

Former FIFA reform taskforce head...Francois Carrard speaks at the 2016 FIFA Congress

BOOKS THIS MONTH

IT'S COMING HOME (PROBABLY)
By John McNicoll
(Pitch Publishing, £12.99)

You're almost there, 90 minutes away from a major final. Italia '90, Euro '96, Russia 2018. Or you're in a major final at Wembley, just like the boys of 1966. *"It's Coming Home"* echoes across England. Surely the trophy drought is coming to an end this time. Except it doesn't...and you're back to square one. From Gazza's tears in 1990 through to penalty heartbreak once again under the Wembley arch at Euro 2020. *It's Coming Home (Probably)* is one man's many years of hurt.

WE'RE GOING TO WEMBLEY
By John Bleasdale and Neil Doherty
(Pitch Publishing, £18.99)

We're Going to Wembley is the fascinating tale of how a team that were written off after failing to qualify for USA '94 came roaring back to restore Scotland's football credibility by reaching the Euro '96 finals. It brings you the inside story through interviews with manager Craig Brown and his players, plus journalists and fans.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

The ever-evolving Guardiola

The Manchester City manager's ability to adapt and tweak his tactics are central to his longevity

The rule of thumb suggests that most managers can survive around a decade at the highest level. There are some exceptions – notably Alex Ferguson and Valeriy Lobanovskyi – but they are rare. It's an exhausting job. There is constant pressure. But it's also intellectually demanding. A manager will have his approach but he constantly has to tinker with it as opponents get used to it and as the wider game evolves.

Nothing in football ever stands still, which is why the tendency for managers to lapse into self-parody can be so damaging. It happened to Brian Clough, it happened to Arsene Wenger and it has happened to Jose Mourinho. Eventually managers are ground down to the point that they lack the capacity to ask what the best solution to any problem is, and instead offer the most characteristic solution, what feels most like what has worked in the past, even if circumstances have changed and that is no longer as appropriate as it was.

It is 16 years since Pep Guardiola became a first-team manager. In that time, he has had one season off, but the other 15 have been spent at the very highest level – at Barcelona, at Bayern Munich and at Manchester City. He started at the top and didn't have to spend any time battling his way to elite level, which might offer some explanation for his continued energy. But still, his longevity is remarkable – and there has been no sense of cycling through the same old plans. Rather, he keeps evolving and remains as imaginative and unpredictable as ever.

That process of evolution began at Barcelona and continued with Bayern but it has accelerated with City. The signing of Erling Haaland two summers ago marked a huge shift, away from a system in which every player was expected to get on the ball and help protect possession to one in which one player, the centre-forward, rather than dropping deep into midfield had freedom to seek out attacking positions. That created a shortfall in midfield, which was compensated for last season by John Stones stepping forward from central defence (and occasionally right-back) into midfield.

Ever-evolving... Pep Guardiola

> Guardiola's longevity is remarkable – and there has been no sense of cycling through the same old plans

With Stones injured, Manuel Akanji has performed that role to an extent this season, but that hasn't been the most notable innovation. Or rather, it's only part of it. The vulnerability of Guardiola sides throughout his career has been to direct counter-attacks, balls played into the space behind his typically high defensive line. His way of trying to guard against that is to have City, when in possession, taking up a 3-2 shape behind the ball, which at the start of this season tended to mean three defenders with Akanji pushing up – as Stones had done – alongside Rodri.

Kyle Walker, as he showed early on against Tottenham in City's penultimate league game, can still be an attacking threat but now he is 34, he tends to be a little more sparing in his forward surges, often tucking in as a de facto third centre-back.

Transformed... Josko Gvardiol

With Guardiola often favouring a player who can operate as a central defender at left-back, the impact has been to make City a taller side – the team that began against Tottenham was on average two inches taller per man than the Barcelona side that started the 2011 Champions League final against Manchester United.

But just as it seemed City had settled on a relatively simple system with three centre-backs plus Walker across the back four, one of them stepping up alongside Rodri when in possession, Guardiola tweaked again to release Josko Gvardiol, who has emerged as a surprising attacking threat in the last few months of the season. That requires another midfielder to drop in alongside Rodri, but it does increase the depth and variety of angles from which City can attack.

There is, of course, continuity from the old Barcelona style. City try to keep the game compact, which means they are passing over short distances, effectively turning every move into a rondo. Again, this season they achieved possession stats in the mid-60s, but with a pass completion rate of over 90 per cent, the first time any side has ever achieved that in the Premier League. But that proximity to each other also makes pressing easier: three or four players can encircle the opponent in possession with few spaces to try to squeeze a pass through. The paradox is that although City seem to be in constant motion, and are clearly exhausting to play against, the short distances mean they probably end up running less than opponents.

But beyond the specifics, what is most significant is that Guardiola keeps changing. There will be times when his tweaks don't quite come off, but far more important is that he remains protean. That not only makes it very hard for opponents to work out strategies to combat City, but also suggests he is a long way from lapsing into the predictability that so often signifies a coach coming to their end at the highest level.

REPORTS WE COULDN'T MAKE UP

Comeback kid... ex-Brazil striker Romario with his son, Romarinho

1 ROMARIO'S RETURN

Former Brazil striker Romario made his return to the pitch at the grand old age of 58. As club president of America-RJ, a team that plays in the second tier of the Rio State Championship, the legendary forward had the authority to fulfil one of his dreams by playing alongside his son, Romarinho. And, on the first day of the league season, a 2-0 victory over Petropolis, he did so, coming off the bench for the dying minutes. Though it is likely to be his only cameo of the season, Romario's return has reportedly attracted a number of new sponsors.

2 BORDER DISPUTE

Provocations between warring neighbours Algeria and Morocco spilled over into the football realm and look to have cost USM Alger a decent chance of retaining their CAF Confederation Cup title – all because of a shirt design.

Their semi-final opponents, RS Berkane, have been wearing a kit with a map of Morocco on the chest throughout this season's competition. The map includes the disputed region of Western Sahara, which Morocco annexed almost 40 years ago but where Algeria supports a struggling liberation movement. This is the basis for frosty relations that have led to the border between the giant North African countries being closed.

When Berkane arrived in Algiers for the first leg of their semi-final, customs confiscated the kit, calling it "political". Berkane went to the stadium for the match but refused to come out of the changing room. CAF's disciplinary committee sided with Berkane and awarded them the game 3-0. USMA appealed and have since sought relief from CAS. They then travelled to Morocco for the return leg but refused to play in a little tit-for-tat. That match was also awarded a 3-0 walkover to Berkane.

The Moroccans went on to lose to Egyptian giants Zamalek in the final, while USMA are hoping CAS might overturn CAF's rulings and allow them to compete in a re-arranged final.

Mark Gleeson

3 INKED INTO HISTORY

Following their unbeaten title-winning season, Bayer Leverkusen are offering a unique opportunity to their fans: a free tattoo. "Book your appointment now to eternalise this unique season on your skin," declared the Bundesliga champions in announcing the offer.

4 BOLIVIAN UNDERDOGS

While the traditional Bolivian giants, The Strongest and Bolivar, were off to excellent starts in the Copa Libertadores, they were outflanked at home as the domestic Apertura title (the first of two per year) went to little San Antonio Bulo Bulo, playing their first top-flight season.

From the tiny town of Entre Rios, San Antonio began their first division life incredibly, with a 5-1 win against The Strongest. After making it into the play-offs, they secured another upset, overcoming Bolivar 2-1 on aggregate. Then came the other surprises: in the semis, Independiente Petrolero were seen off 7-4, and in the two-legged decider San Antonio beat Universitario de Vinto 3-2.

The biggest hero, 23-year-old Argentine attacker Felipe Passadore, has a particularly wonderful story. In 2022, he went looking for a club on social media; two years later he was the Bolivian championship's top scorer, with his five goals in the last four games proving vital. Next year, he and his team-mates' journey will continue in the Copa Libertadores.

Tim Vickery

5 SEEING DOUBLE

Credit to Madame Tussauds Berlin for truly nailing Kylian Mbappe, after the France captain's waxwork model was unveiled in a pop-up event in Paris in May.

Uncanny...Kylian Mbappe meets Kylian Mbappe

"Some of the best moments I had with Wales and the goals I scored were because of Leighton. He was some talent…one of the best two-footed players I've ever played with or seen"

John Toshack pays tribute to former Wales team-mate Leighton James

OBITUARIES

World Cup heartbreak… Karl-Heinz Schnellinger (#3) watches Martin Peters celebrate scoring in the 1966 World Cup final

Karl-Heinz SCHNELLINGER (1939-2024)
Schnellinger was one of the world's finest left-backs during his playing days, going to four World Cups in a row between 1958 and 1970. The first of those came when he was only 19 and had yet to play in the German national championship, but that changed when he was signed by Cologne after the finals.

Four years later, he was named German Footballer of the Year as the club won their first league title, and took that form into that summer's World Cup, earning a spot in the Team of the Tournament and finishing third in the 1962 Ballon d'Or voting.

In 1963, he moved to Italy, spending a year with Mantova and another at Roma, but it was at Milan that his career took off. In nine years, he won eight trophies, including the 1969 European Cup when he started the 4-1 final win over Ajax.

Schnellinger didn't miss a minute of West Germany's run to the 1966 World Cup final, and was a regular again four years later as they finished third in Mexico. He scored his only international goal in the semi-final epic against Italy, subsequently dubbed "The Game of the Century", as his equaliser in the 92nd minute took the game to extra-time before the Germans ultimately lost 4-3.

Charlie HURLEY (1936-2024)
A Sunderland icon, widely considered the club's greatest player, having played over 400 games in 12 seasons after joining in 1957. An uncompromising yet elegant centre-half, Hurley's main achievement at Roker Park was starring in the side that won promotion to the First Division in 1964, and he was revered in the north east, named the club's Player of the Century in their centenary year in 1979.

Born in Cork, he grew up in London and began his career at Millwall before heading north. When he played his 40th and final international for the Republic of Ireland in 1969, he was his country's most-capped player.

Leighton JAMES (1953-2024)
James' name is one that is inked into the history of Swansea City. It was his goal – scored after a trademark jinking run from the left wing followed by a dipping shot into the far corner – against Preston in 1981 that took his hometown club into the First Division for the first time.

By then, James had already played over 300 Football League games, for Burnley (twice) either side of spells at Derby County and QPR. He was brought back to South Wales by then-Swans boss John Toshack to help the club complete a meteoric rise from the fourth tier to the first. The winger went on to play for Sunderland, Bury and Newport County before ending his career with a third and final spell at Burnley, where he still ranks tenth in all-time appearances for the club.

Equally as historic as that Preston strike was the penalty he scored for Wales against England in 1977, the Dragons' only ever victory at Wembley.

Fabian CANCELARICH (1965-2024)
The perennial No.2 keeper, Cancelarich was called up 30 times for Argentina – including their runs to the 1990 World Cup final and the 1991 Copa America trophy – without ever winning a cap.

Terry MEDWIN (1932-2024)
Before Gareth Bale's free-kick against Slovakia at Euro 2016, Medwin was the last Welshman to score at a major finals, having notched the winning goal against Hungary at the 1958 World Cup that took Wales to a quarter-final clash with Brazil.

The forward began at Swansea in 1949, hitting 60 goals in 148 league appearances, before joining Tottenham in 1956. He went on to feature in the double-winning season of 1960-61 under Bill Nicholson, and played in the victorious FA Cup final a year later.

Spurs double winner …Terry Medwin

Bernd HOLZENBEIN (1946-2024)
No player has scored more Bundesliga goals for Eintracht Frankfurt than the 160 that Holzenbein plundered between 1967 and 1981. His time coincided with the most successful period in the club's history, as he helped fire them to three German Cups and the 1980 UEFA Cup.

He played six times at the 1974 World Cup, including the final win against the Netherlands when he started on the left side of West Germany's attack. Two years later, he scored in the Euros final in the penalty-shootout loss to Czechoslovakia.

Holzenbein…Eintracht Frankfurt remember their club icon

Mykhaylo FOMENKO (1948-2024)
After a successful playing career that included winning the UEFA Cup Winners' Cup with Dynamo Kyiv, Fomenko made his name in a coaching career that lasted over 30 years and culminated with a four-year spell in charge of Ukraine, leading his country to Euro 2016.

Burnley legend… Leighton James

Joe KINNEAR (1946-2024)
As a player, Kinnear won the FA Cup, UEFA Cup and two League Cups with Tottenham and 26 caps for Republic of Ireland, but he will be best remembered for his time in charge of Wimbledon's "Crazy Gang".

Kinnear took charge of The Dons in January 1992, and he led them into the Premier League era later that year. In his second full season, he guided the club to sixth place – their joint best-ever finish – to earn the LMA Manager of the Year award, and later gave them their first taste of European football by competing in the Intertoto Cup.

Kinnear stepped down at Wimbledon in 1999 after suffering a heart attack, but returned to football two years later as manager of Luton Town, guiding them to promotion from the third tier. He later had brief spells in charge of Nottingham Forest and Newcastle United.

"Crazy Gang" days… Kinnear as Wimbledon manager in the 1990s

"It's my last year at Paris Saint-Germain. I will not extend and the adventure will come to an end in a few weeks"

Kylian Mbappe finally confirms that he will leave Paris Saint-Germain this summer

IN

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

34 Moves That Caught Our Eye This Month

OUT

EUROPE

TONI KROOS
The **Germany** and **Real Madrid** midfielder announced that he will retire after the Euros.

ARNE SLOT
Liverpool confirmed that the Dutchman will replace Jurgen Klopp as their manager.

MAURICIO POCHETTINO
The Argentine manager left **Chelsea** by mutual consent at the end of the season.

ROBERTO DE ZERBI
The Italian stepped down as **Brighton** boss at the conclusion of the Premier League campaign.

JULEN LOPETEGUI
The former Wolves and Spain boss replaced David Moyes as manager of **West Ham United**.

TOMMY DOYLE
Wolves made the Manchester City midfielder's loan into a permament deal for £4.3 million.

MASSIMILIANO ALLEGRI
Juventus sacked Allegri after he was sent off at the end of their Coppa Italia final victory.

FABIO CANNAVARO
The ex-Italy captain took charge of **Udinese** for the finals weeks of the Serie A season.

CLAUDIO RANIERI
The 72-year-old retired from club football after steering **Cagliari** to Serie A safety.

Fond farewell ...Ranieri says goodbye on the Cagliari pitch

QUIQUE SANCHEZ FLORES
Sevilla parted company with their head coach after a mid-table finish in La Liga.

WILL STILL
The 31-year-old left **Reims** by mutual consent.

JEAN-LOUIS GASSET
After serving as **Marseille**'s interim coach, the 70-year-old retired at the end of the season.

SEBASTIEN BICHARD
Appointed as **Strasbourg**'s assistant manager back in March, Bichard stepped up to replace the outgoing Pascal Gastien as head coach.

CHRISTIAN STREICH
Freiburg's long-serving manager stepped down 12-and-a-half years after taking charge, with his assistant Julian Schuster replacing him.

NENAD BJELICA
Union Berlin sacked their manager with two games of the season left, before staying up on the final day under caretaker boss Marco Grote.

PEP LIJNDERS
Jurgen Klopp's assistant took charge of **Red Bull Salzburg** after leaving Anfield.

ROBIN VAN PERSIE
The former Netherlands striker took his first managerial role in charge of **Heerenveen**.

HEDWIGES MADURO
Ajax's assistant manager left Amsterdam to take charge of Eredivisie side **Almere City**.

JIMMY THELIN
The Swedish coach will leave Elfsborg for **Aberdeen** this summer after finishing second in Sweden's Allsvenskan campaign in 2023.

NICK MONTGOMERY
The former Central Coast Mariners boss left **Hibernian** at the end of his first season.

SERGEJ BARBAREZ
Bosnia & Herzegovina appointed their former striker as national team head coach.

VIVIANNE MIEDEMA
Arsenal Women announced that the WSL's all-time record scorer will leave this summer.

FRAN KIRBY
Chelsea Women also said goodbye to their record scorer, with Kirby leaving this summer.

STEPH HOUGHTON
The former **England Women** captain retired at the end of her record 14th WSL season.

RACHEL DALY
The **England** and **Aston Villa** forward, a member of the Lionesses' Euro 2022-winning team, announced her international retirement.

NOLBERTO SOLANO
The former Peru winger took charge of **Blyth Spartans** in the sixth tier of English football.

SOUTH AMERICA

THIAGO SILVA
The defender rejoined Brazilian side **Fluminense** after leaving Chelsea at the end of the season.

CARLOS TEVEZ
The ex-Argentina striker left **Independiente** after less than a year in charge of the club.

MARTA
The **Brazil** forward will retire from international football after this summer's Olympics in Paris.

Brazilian legend...Marta

AFRICA

OTTO ADDO
Having led the team at the 2022 World Cup, Addo was reappointed as manager of **Ghana**.

JOHNNY McKINSTRY
The Northen Irish coach took charge of **Gambia**.

FINIDI GEORGE
Nigeria hired their former winger as coach.

CONCACAF

JESSE MARSCH
Canada appointed the former Leeds United boss ahead of this summer's Copa America.

OLIVIER GIROUD
France's record scorer, who will quit international football after the Euros, left Milan for **LAFC**.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	24
Wojciech Szczesny (Juventus)	9
Lukas Hradecky (Bayer Leverkusen)	8
Andriy Lunin (Real Madrid)	8
Marcin Bulka (Nice)	6
Alisson (Liverpool)	4
Marc-Andre ter Stegen (Barcelona)	4
Gregor Kobel (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Ederson (Manchester City)	2
Mile Svilar (Roma)	2
Kepa Arrizabalaga (Real Madrid)	1
Lucas Chevalier (Lille)	1
Paulo Gazzaniga (Girona)	1
Kamil Grabara (Copenhagen)	1
Nordin Jackers (Club Brugge)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Giorgi Mamardashvili (Valencia)	1
Christos Mandas (Lazio)	1
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	1
Alexander Meyer (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	1
Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	1
Andre Onana (Manchester United)	1
Ivan Provedel (Lazio)	1
David Raya (Arsenal)	1
Bart Verbruggen (Brighton & Hove Albion)	1

DEFENDERS

Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	37
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	27
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	18
Jonathan Tah (Bayer Leverkusen)	18
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	17
Jeremie Frimpong (Bayer Leverkusen)	15
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	13
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	11
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	10
Ben White (Arsenal)	10
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	9
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	9
Bremer (Juventus)	8
Joao Cancelo (Barcelona)	5
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	5
Piero Hincapie (Bayer Leverkusen)	5
Benjamin Pavard (Internazionale)	5
William Saliba (Arsenal)	5
Francesco Acerbi (Internazionale)	4
Pau Cubarsi (Barcelona)	4
Gabriel (Arsenal)	4
Achraf Hakimi (Paris Saint-Germain)	4
Mats Hummels (Borussia Dortmund)	4
Cristian Romero (Tottenham Hotspur)	4
Jean-Clair Todibo (Nice)	4
Micky van de Ven (Tottenham Hotspur)	4
Conor Bradley (Liverpool)	3
Dante (Nice)	3
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	3
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	3
Federico Gatti (Juventus)	3
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	3
Odilon Kossounou (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Gianluca Mancini (Roma)	3
Waldemar Anton (Stuttgart)	2
Ronald Araujo (Barcelona)	2
Riccardo Calafiori (Bologna)	2
Yan Couto (Girona)	2
Matteo Darmian (Internazionale)	2
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	2
Mario Hermoso (Atletico Madrid)	2
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	2
Arthur Masuaku (Besiktas)	2
Nicolas Otamendi (Benfica)	2
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	2
Jordan Teze (PSV)	2
Kieran Trippier (Newcastle United)	2
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	2
Axel Witsel (Atletico Madrid)	2
Nathan Ake (Manchester City)	1
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	1
Sam Beukema (Bologna)	1

Daley Blind (Girona)	1
Olivier Boscagli (PSV)	1
Jarrad Branthwaite (Everton)	1
Andreas Christensen (Barcelona)	1
Sebastian Coates (Sporting)	1
Danilo (Juventus)	1
Oscar De Marcos (Athletic Club)	1
Zeno Debast (Anderlecht)	1
Eric Garcia (Girona)	1
Miguel Gutierrez (Girona)	1
David Hancko (Feyenoord)	1
Theo Hernandez (Milan)	1
Goncalo Inacio (Sporting)	1
Florian Lejeune (Rayo Vallecano)	1
Tino Livramento (Newcastle United)	1
Jhon Lucumi (Bologna)	1
Castello Lukeba (RB Leipzig)	1
Koki Machida (Union Saint-Gilloise)	1
Ian Maatsen (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Maximilian Mittelstadt (Stuttgart)	1
Nahuel Molina (Atletico Madrid)	1
Stefan Posch (Bologna)	1
Luca Ranieri (Fiorentina)	1
David Raum (RB Leipzig)	1
Fabian Schar (Newcastle United)	1
Nico Schlotterbeck (Borussia Dortmund)	1
John Stones (Manchester City)	1
Niklas Sule (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Edmond Tapsoba (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Filippo Terracciano (Milan)	1
Fikayo Tomori (Milan)	1
William Troost-Ekong (PAOK)	1
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Granit Xhaka (Bayer Leverkusen)	7
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Vitinha (Paris Saint-Germain)	6
Alexis Mac Allister (Liverpool)	5
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Joey Veerman (PSV)	3
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	2
Aleix Garcia (Girona)	2
Yangel Herrera (Girona)	2
Curtis Jones (Liverpool)	2
Teun Koopmeiners (Atalanta)	2
Mohammed Kudus (West Ham United)	2
Douglas Luiz (Aston Villa)	2
John McGinn (Aston Villa)	2
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Internazionale)	2
Ismael Saibari (PSV)	2
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	2
Christoph Baumgartner (RB Leipzig)	1
Giacomo Bonaventura (Fiorentina)	1
Maxence Caqueret (Lyon)	1
Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona)	1
Charles De Ketelaere (Atalanta)	1
Rodrigo De Paul (Atletico Madrid)	1

Thomas Delaney (Anderlecht)	1
Wataru Endo (Liverpool)	1
Rasmus Falk (Copenhagen)	1
Chris Fuhrich (Stuttgart)	1
Gavi (Barcelona)	1
Pedro Goncalves (Sporting)	1
Pascal Gross (Brighton & Hove Albion)	1
Isco (Real Betis)	1
Takefusa Kubo (Real Sociedad)	1
Enzo Le Fee (Rennes)	1
Pierre Lees-Melou (Brest)	1
Ruben Loftus-Cheek (Milan)	1
Ivan Martin (Girona)	1
Weston McKennie (Juventus)	1
Scott McTominay (Manchester United)	1
Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton & Hove Albion)	1
Hidemasa Morita (Sporting)	1
Exequiel Palacios (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Lucas Paqueta (West Ham United)	1
Mario Pasalic (Atalanta)	1
Tijjani Reijnders (Milan)	1
Rodrigo Riquelme (Atletico Madrid)	1
Marcel Sabitzer (Borussia Dortmund)	1
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Christian Pulisic (Milan)	3
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Julian Alvarez (Manchester City)	2
Jeremy Doku (Manchester City)	2
Evanilson (Porto)	2
Santiago Gimenez (Feyenoord)	2
Sebastien Haller (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Diogo Jota (Liverpool)	2
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	2
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	2
Rafa Silva (Benfica)	2
Jarrod Bowen (West Ham United)	1
Jonathan David (Lille)	1
Memphis Depay (Atletico Madrid)	1
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Paulo Dybala (Roma)	1
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Niclas Fullkrug (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Alejandro Garnacho (Manchester United)	1
Rasmus Hojlund (Manchester United)	1
Mauro Icardi (Galatasaray)	1
Alexander Isak (Newcastle United)	1
Rafael Leao (Milan)	1
Romelu Lukaku (Roma)	1
Darwin Nunez (Liverpool)	1
Lois Openda (RB Leipzig)	1
Riccardo Orsolini (Bologna)	1
Victor Osimhen (Napoli)	1
Goncalo Ramos (Paris Saint-Germain)	1
Savio (Girona)	1
Gianluca Scamacca (Atalanta)	1
Dominic Solanke (Bournemouth)	1
Marcus Thuram (Internazionale)	1
Leandro Trossard (Arsenal)	1
Ayase Ueda (Feyenoord)	1
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Ollie Watkins (Aston Villa)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *Elf Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

eye witness

Steve Menary reports

ARUBA

'Football in Aruba is showing signs of stirring'

For sale...an Al Nassr shirt on display in Oranjestad

Football on Aruba has been shaped by myriad influences. Politically, the Caribbean island is a country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, its old colonial masters. Dutch is spoken, but Spanish more widely due to large influxes of South American immigrants. Colombians seeking refuge from the 1990s drug wars were followed by Venezuelans escaping their imploding economy, but the overwhelming influence comes from North America.

A century ago, the Lago Oil Refinery opened on Aruba's southern tip and Americans flooded in. Now closed for over a decade, the refinery sits rusting on the outskirts of San Nicholas, Aruba's second-largest city, but the US still wields significant power. Tourists, predominantly from the US east coast, flock to the pristine beaches and provide 80 per cent of the island's income. The dollar is used as commonly as the Aruban Florin and baseball casts a long shadow over Aruban sport. Five Arubans have played Major League Baseball recently with Xander Bogaerts winning the World Series with the Boston Red Sox in 2013 – heights that the island's football players can only dream of.

Nations League win...Aruba players Benjamin Maria and Jaydon Dania celebrate during a 5-1 win over the Cayman Islands *Credit: CONCACAF*

While the island boasts the well-appointed Joe Laveist baseball park in San Nicholas, Aruba's national football side were not even able to play at home between 2016 and 2023 as the Guillermo Prospero Trinidad Stadium in the capital of Oranjestad fell short of FIFA's criteria. Now, after decades languishing in the shadows not just of baseball but of the footballing growth in the neighbouring Dutch Caribbean island of Curacao, the game in Aruba is showing signs of stirring.

"The Nations League is the best thing that has happened to CONCACAF football, particularly for the small islands like Aruba," says Randolf Lacle, who after years in various functions at the Aruban Football Federation (AVB), including secretary, took over as president in July 2021.

"When I was first involved we would play a qualifier and after two games we would be out, then there was a long wait for the next game. This year, we will play nine matches. When I started, it could take us five or six years to play that many matches. With the Nations League, now our national team can be an entity that we can sell."

That selling comes on two fronts. While Oranjestad's shops and markets offer football shirts from around the world, including a Saudi Arabian club shirt courtesy of Cristano Ronaldo's role at Al Nassr, there is no sign of an Aruban jersey.

There is also another type of sales pitch – for players. While Curacao has recruited legendary Dutch coach Dick Advocaat as manager to attract big-name players with links to the island for a tilt at 2026 World Cup qualification, Lacle and the AVB are looking to build longer-term foundations.

Sitting in a cafe in downtown Oranjestad, Lacle explains: "Now we have more games, players want to play. We are looking abroad for players but in the third, fourth and fifth tier and at younger players because we are

> "The Nations League is the best thing that has happened to CONCACAF football, particularly for the small islands like Aruba"
>
> **Randolf Lacle, Aruban Football Federation (AVB) president**

Aruba's first love... outside the island's baseball ground

focusing on the longer term. We are recruiting younger players at youth and amateur level. If they are 19 or 20, then they can still make it, but if they are 26 then maybe not. We are trying to create top-level players."

The recruitment drive is Europe. When Aruba lost 5-0 to Guatemala in CONCACAF Under-20 Championship qualifying in February 2024, 13 of their 22-player squad were based in the Netherlands. Some had moved to Europe to further their ambitions, such as captain Jaybrien Romano, who was in the academy at Stoke City and then Aldershot Town before moving to the Netherlands to turn professional at Den Bosch.

There are also Aruban juniors in the academies at Ajax and Feyenoord, while the AVB has a talent development scheme programme, which has been sponsored by Aruba Bank and is led by FIFA talent coach Chris Beardsley.

An obstacle is FIFA rules that prevent junior players moving to the Netherlands without their parents. Lacle understands the rules are there for a reason, but adds: "The ideal age to make that move is 13 or 14. They need a mentor to guide them through the process. If we can find a way to support them, it can work as we have coaches [in the Netherlands]. It's difficult if the young players stay here and don't keep challenging themselves."

Key man... Aruba midfielder Rovien Ostiana
Credit: DACimages

Lacle and the AVB are also looking to improve the standard of the local league. Top-flight clubs charge on the gate but with ticket prices of around $4 and crowds that might only reach 200 for a big game, no one playing in the Aruban Division di Honor makes a living playing football.

Although Nacional did finish fourth at the 2018 Caribbean Shield, Aruban clubs have had little success in regional tournaments. Changing that situation will take time, but Lacle is starting by introducing club licensing in return for improving facilities that are often left wanting on a windy island whose interior resembles the Mexican desert more than the Caribbean.

Aruba has just four artificial pitches and three are controlled by a local sports foundation. Piedra Plat-based Britannia are the only club side with an artificial turf, but the AVB has secured FIFA funding to lay artificial pitches for the other seven clubs in the 2023-24 Division di Honor.

Lacle explains: "When I came in one of the things I wanted to do was tackle the facilities. We have the money and it's better to do it now. We are starting with the big clubs and we looked back over the past 25 years and had a points system based on rewarding clubs for their efforts on their programmes."

Dakota, Nacional, Estrella, RCA, River Plate, La Fama and Bubali will get pitches, in return for complying with a licensing regime that requires clubs to provide audited accounts rather than simple budgets.

"Sometimes I see the budgets

Grudge match...Aruba will hosts neighbours Curacao in June

and I think: 'Come on, do you think you are Real Madrid?'" jokes Lacle, before adding: "Now, with this new system, clubs will have some credibility when they go looking for sponsors. If the clubs comply with everything, they will have three stars."

The rewards of these changes will only be felt further down the line and are unlikely to have much tangible impact when the 2026 World Cup qualifiers commence in June (more on page 88). The draw for Group C pits Aruba against regional heavyweights Haiti, St Lucia, Barbados and a tie that the whole island wants – Curacao.

The two islands were the main constituents of the old Netherlands Antilles, which also included Bonaire, Sint Maarten and Sint Eustatius, but Curacao joined FIFA independently in 1932. Players from Aruba sometimes played, including seven of the squad that travelled to Finland for the 1952 Olympic football tournament. The side were eliminated in the first round and two years later the Netherlands Antilles Voetbal Unie officially took on the FIFA membership.

A halcyon period for Dutch Caribbean football ensued. In 1955, the Antilles took bronze at the Pan-American Games football competition behind winners Argentina and Mexico, and then finished third at the CONCACAF Championship in 1963 and 1969.

Political pressure saw the grouping begin to fall apart in both political and sporting terms. The AVB had formed back in 1932, but only played ad hoc games until joining CONCACAF independently in 1986 and FIFA two years later. In 2010, the Antilles was officially dissolved with Curacao reclaiming their FIFA membership.

Aruba's independent steps were slow and their first entry into the World Cup qualifiers was not until 1998, but the Nations League has brought both more games and also more success. Marvic Bermudez's side won promotion from Group B of the third tier in the latest season with maximum points.

There was a standout contribution from 22-year-old Rovien Ostiana, who plays for Volendam, recently relegated from the Dutch top flight. Born in Rotterdam to an Aruban mother, Ostiana was only two minutes into his international debut when he scored in a 2-1 victory over the Cayman Islands.

The following month, Ostiana netted again as Aruba finally returned to the upgraded Guillermo Prospero Trinidad Stadium after a seven-year absence and beat the US Virgin Islands 3-1. Finishing with five goals in four games, Ostiana was named in the League C Best XI and is looking forward to the World Cup qualifiers and the game with Curacao on June 8 in particular.

"I can't wait to show the people what Aruba has got against strong opponents," adds Ostiana. "I think it's going to be a good match-up, especially us being the underdogs of the group and playing the first game at home with our home fans. Hopefully that gives us the extra push that we need."

The Guillermo Prospero Trinidad Stadium only has a capacity of around 2,500 and Lacle says the AVB could have sold the ground out three times for the derby. With Aruba seeded fifth, there is no pressure and nobody is considering World Cup qualification. But with a young, developing team other targets could be achievable.

"I think it's possible for us to participate in a big tournament like the Gold Cup [in the US]," says Ostiana. "I strongly believe it's going to happen. The AVB is doing their best not only for us but for the whole soccer community out there in Aruba. All we need is for our people in Aruba to believe in us, to support us, that's all we need at this moment."

Perhaps in the future, baseball players might not be the only Arubans playing top-class sport in the USA.

> "I think it's possible for us to participate in a big tournament like the Gold Cup. I strongly believe it's going to happen"
>
> Aruba midfielder Rovien Ostiana

Renovated...the Guillermo Prospero Trinidad Stadium

ENGLAND
9

WAYNE'S WORLD

How a precocious teenager made England believe they could win Euro 2004

Words: Ryan Baldi

"I doubt how much Rooney can give to the England team," France defender Lilian Thuram told the English media in the lead-up to the 2004 European Championship. "He is very young – too young for such a hard competition like this."

Any remaining doubts that Thuram had over Rooney's readiness for such a high international stage would have been eradicated 73 minutes into the first match of France's title defence at the Estadio da Luz in Lisbon. The 18-year-old England striker had looked completely at ease throughout, despite sharing a pitch with the likes of Zinedine Zidane, Thierry Henry and Patrick Vieira, not to mention the more established members of the Three Lions' so-called Golden Generation. His touch was immaculate, his passing precise and his physicality domineering.

But with 17 minutes to play, he proved unequivocally that he not only belonged at the tournament; he was intent upon owning it.

Chasing a cleared ball near the halfway line, Rooney, with the outside of his right boot, flicked it over Thuram's head, collected it on the other side of the decorated defender and raced toward the France goal. Entering the penalty area, he effortlessly sidestepped Mikael Silvestre before being hauled down by the Manchester United centre-back to win a penalty.

Fabien Barthez saved David Beckham's spot-kick. Later, in stoppage time, after Rooney had been substituted, England capitulated, sloppily conceding a 20-yard free-kick and a penalty, both of which Zidane scored to give France a 2-1 win.

It speaks to the shocking fearlessness of the England forward's performance that despite the three-time World Player of the Year providing last-gasp game-changing interventions, Rooney's name dominated the post-game discourse.

"We were just open-mouthed on the bench," remembers Jamie Carragher, an England substitute that evening. "We were playing France, who were probably the best team in the world at the time. The players he was coming up against, it was unbelievable watching it from the side of the pitch.

"You were almost laughing. He was embarrassing top players who were playing for one of the biggest nations in the world. It was that feeling that he was playing football without thinking too much; just doing what he wanted to do."

Point proven...Rooney holds off a stern challenge from France defender Lilian Thuram at the Estadio da Luz

Emile Heskey, the striker whose place in the starting line-up was ostensibly taken by Rooney, could have been forgiven for feeling a degree of bitterness at the teenager's emergence. But the former Liverpool player was as impressed as anyone with Rooney's breakthrough.

"Wayne was just taking things in his stride," Heskey says. "Wayne believed in his ability that much that when he did certain things, it was like: 'Well, isn't that normal?' And you're like: 'No, it isn't!'

"We were in awe. But Wayne, in his head, this was what he was supposed to be doing. There was no one who could stop him. And it's great to have that sort of confidence."

No one could have predicted that Rooney would be so at ease under the brightest possible spotlight, that he would stand out in a match so star-studded. But his generational talent was no secret.

He was so prodigious a prospect

Instant impact... Rooney wins a penalty against holders France

Record-breaking goal...Rooney celebrates scoring against Switzerland with captain David Beckham

that, within the Everton youth teams, he was playing for the Under-19s by the age of just 14. He starred in the club's run to the FA Youth Cup final in 2002 and when he made his first-team debut as a 16-year-old in August that year, starting and providing an assist in a 2-2 draw with Tottenham Hotspur, he became the second-youngest player ever to play for Everton's senior side. Five days before his 17th birthday, in October 2002, a stunning 25-yard winner against champions Arsenal at Goodison Park made Rooney the Premier League's youngest-ever scorer.

"I knew quite a bit about him without actually seeing him play," Carragher says. "He was spoken about a lot in the city, that they [Everton] had this kid in the youth team. But those types of things have been heard before. That wasn't uncommon. There was always someone spoken about every few years – whether it was at Liverpool or Everton – that look pretty special.

"I'd never seen him play until his debut at home to Tottenham. Everton at that time had a decent team under David Moyes. For him to be put straight in, I thought he must be pretty special."

In February 2003, aged just 17 years and 111 days, Rooney became England's youngest senior international, coming off the bench in a 3-1 defeat to Australia. Later that year, on September 6, he became his nation's youngest-ever scorer, netting his first Three Lions goal in a Euro 2004 qualifier against North Macedonia.

"The biggest thing that stood out was that he had absolutely no fear," Carragher says. "It looked like he was just acting and carrying on the way he would with his mates. I think we all have that little bit of trepidation when we go to the England squad. It's a level up from your club. And without being disrespectful, it was a huge leap from the players he was training with at Everton on a daily basis. So to make that step up at such a young age and to have no fear and feel like he was one of the best players straightaway, that was the thing that really stood out. It was not just his ability, his physical strength – it was how he dealt with the group and mixed in.

"He's a joker. He's from Liverpool. What you see on TV and in interviews, he looks quite shy. But in the dressing room, he has always been one of the big characters, certainly in the England dressing room. He could get away with things that others probably couldn't at such a young age because he was so good as a player. There was already that respect from the older players. It wasn't the case of a young guy getting carried away and the older ones having to put him back in his place. Within being with England for a few get-togethers, he was probably already in the top four or five players in the squad."

And Heskey remembers being struck by Rooney's maturity, both physical and footballing. "When you come into the national team as a young lad – we had it with Joe Cole, we had it with Theo Walcott – you see why the hype is there," he says. "They are fantastic players. Wayne was a standout as well. He was a man-child. He could physically handle everything that was thrown at him, plus he had the ability and the know-how and the intelligence to do certain things on the ball. He was fantastic."

That Rooney would be among Sven-Goran Eriksson's 23-man squad for the tournament finals was beyond

> "We were just open-mouthed on the bench ...You were almost laughing – he was embarrassing top players"
>
> Former England defender Jamie Carragher

doubt. The performance that sealed the Everton youngster's ascent into the starting line-up came merely a month after his first international cap. Rooney didn't score in the 2-0 win over Turkey at Sunderland's Stadium of Light, but he was majestic throughout his 88-minute display.

"He was England's best player in that game," Carragher remembers. "On the back of that performance, it felt like he was on level pegging with Michael Owen. Going into the tournament, there was no question over whether he would start."

If Rooney Mania had at all been tempered by the France game ultimately ending in defeat, the hysteria was untethered by his next two outings. Just 23 minutes into England's second group-stage fixture, against Switzerland in Coimbra, he became – albeit briefly – the youngest goalscorer in the competition's history when he nodded home a Michael Owen cross. Four days later, Switzerland's own teen prodigy, Johan Vonlanthen, took the record with a strike against France.

Rooney scored a second against the Swiss, sealing a 3-0 victory, although the goal was somewhat generously awarded to him by UEFA officials – his low effort from the edge of the box cannoned back of the post and ricocheted into the net off the back of goalkeeper Jorg Stiel. It ought to have been recorded as an own goal.

Against Croatia in England's final group game, Rooney was again electric and unstoppable. England, needing a win to assure their progress to the knockout rounds, fell behind to an early Niko Kovac goal. Rooney conjured an equaliser with a cleverly headed assist for Paul Scholes. He then added another two goals to his tournament tally, setting Eriksson's side on their way to an eventual 4-2 victory.

> **Rooney would never again make the kind of impact at a major international tournament that he made in 2004**

His second strike against Croatia epitomised the youngster's physical prowess, technical skill and unshakable confidence, as he played a one-two with Owen near the halfway line, then surged beyond five chasing defenders before coolly wrong-footing the goalkeeper.

"That was when Rooney Mania took off, like Gazza in 1990," Carragher says. "The legend was born from there. And you know that England games, even if it's just two or three at a tournament, they can catapult you into a completely different level, the way you're seen by teams around the world and the public. That's all it took."

The win secured second place in Group B and set up a quarter-final showdown with Portugal. In 19-year-old Cristiano Ronaldo, fresh off his debut season with Manchester United, the host nation had their own young superstar in the making. But Rooney, at the time, looked a level above not only his talented teenage peers but just about anyone else at the tournament.

England took an early lead in the quarter-final when Michael Owen pounced on a defensive mix-up to score. But then disaster struck. With 25 minutes played, Rooney and Portugal centre-back Jorge Andrade became entangled in a challenge.

Dream over... Rooney leaves the pitch injured

Iconic...Rooney celebrates after scoring v Croatia

A back-and-forth encounter ensued. England thought they'd won it in stoppage time, only for Sol Campbell's headed goal to be disallowed for a foul off the ball by John Terry. Deadlocked at 1-1 after 90 minutes, each side scored in extra-time and, once again, English hearts were broken in a penalty shootout.

Despite there being no fairy-tale ending to his storybook summer, Rooney's star had risen. He joined Manchester United in a £27 million deal shortly after the Euros. He would go on to become the club's all-time leading scorer, winning five Premier League titles and the Champions League. He would break England's scoring record, too, notching 53 in 120 caps for his country, a mark since eclipsed by Harry Kane.

But Rooney would never again make the kind of impact at a major international tournament that he made in 2004. After vanquishing a Rooney-less England, Portugal went on to reach the final, where they lost to 150-1 pre-tournament outsiders Greece. The shock defeat for the hosts only further cemented the Three Lions' quarter-final loss as one of England greatest what-ifs: *what if Rooney hadn't gotten injured?*

"He could produce two or three moments that could either get you a goal or come very close," Carragher says. "With Rooney, I think you have to fancy yourself to win that game."

The Portugal defender trod on Rooney's foot, causing his boot to come off. Referee Urs Meier gave Portugal a free-kick.

Rooney, it quickly became apparent, had lost a lot more than just a boot; England had lost more than a free-kick.

The talismanic teenager tried to continue, but he could not. It would later be revealed that he'd suffered a broken metatarsal in the challenge. Aston Villa's Darius Vassell came on in his place. Rooney's tournament was over.

"When you've got someone playing so well, so confident and taking on the world as he was, to lose him like that was huge," Heskey says.

"We had some great players in that tournament, so you don't think all is lost," adds Carragher. "But when you're going into that game with him up front, you think you're going to win. You then start thinking the odds are against us and it's going to be a 50-50 game now. And that's what happened."

Broken metatarsal ...England manager Sven-Goran Eriksson looks on as Rooney receives treatment

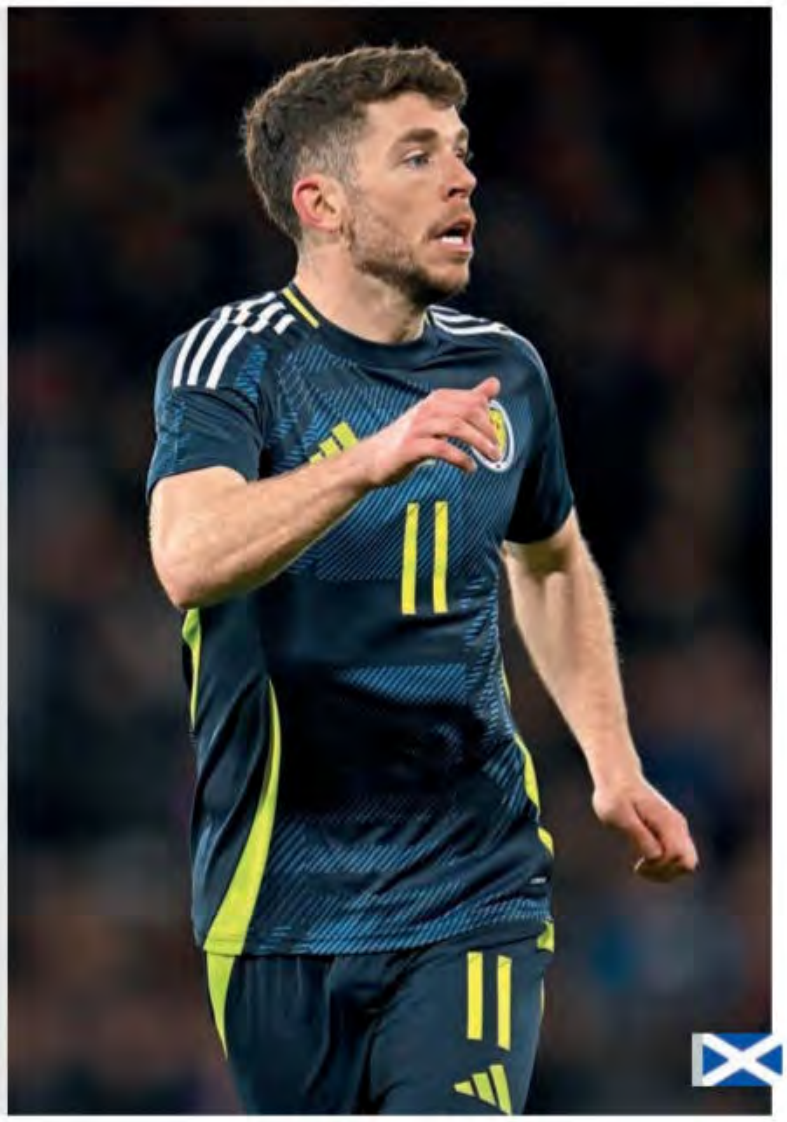
EURO 2024
ONES TO WATCH

Nick Bidwell picks out the players to keep an eye on in Germany, including breakout stars, rising talents, transfer targets and more

Ryan CHRISTIE
(Scotland)

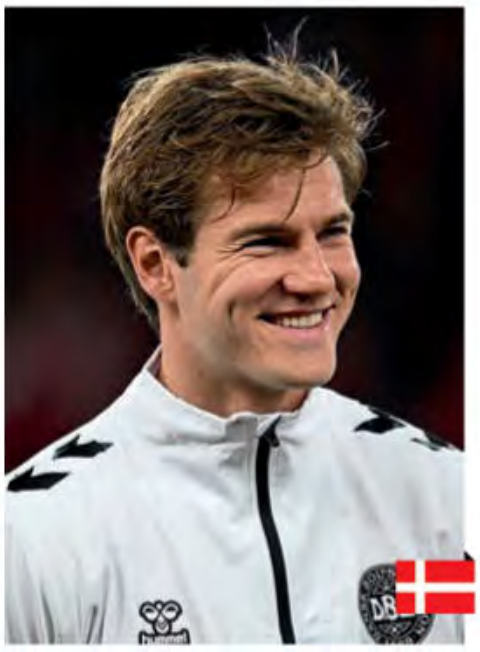
The Bournemouth midfielder is living proof you can teach an old dog new tricks. Before this season, the 29-year-old from the Scottish Highlands had made his name as a cultured, inventive playmaker or occasionally an inverted winger. However, all that was to change last summer when new Bournemouth manager Andoni Iraola laid out his plans to use Christie in a box-to-box role at the Vitality Stadium.

Ostensibly, it seemed a strange call. But what a success the Scotland international, fast approaching 50 caps, has made of his revised brief. While the classy touches, eagle-eyed vision and eye for goal remain, the former Inverness Caledonian Thistle, Aberdeen and Celtic star has transformed himself into a Marathon Man in the middle of the park, full of energy, commitment and pressing intensity. Turnovers are one of the most valuable of commodities in the modern game and in the reimagined Christie, Bournemouth have unearthed a genuine specialist, one of the best in the Premier League in harrying, intercepting and closing off passing lanes.



Despite appearing in all eight of Scotland's Euro 2024 qualifiers, he only started in four and he has yet to feature for his country as a midfield dynamo, with all four of those starts coming as a wide midfielder-slash-forward. With Scotland struggling for form and confidence of late – losing five games and drawing two after beating Cyprus last September – and with fellow midfielder Lewis Ferguson ruled out of the tournament with a season-ending ACL injury, manager Steve Clarke must be tempted to give Christie an extended run in the side.

Besides the midfielder's heart of a lion, hard running and desire, he is so strong on the ball, very comfortable picking it up from his defence and creating chances from a deeper position – arguably even more than he ever did when stationed further forward. He has become a completely different player. Time for Scotland to use Christie 2.0.



Joachim ANDERSEN
(Denmark)

The classy Crystal Palace defender is a typically fearsome Scandinavian centre-back: muscular, strong, never one to shirk a challenge and aerially dominant. An added bonus is the 28-year-old's outstanding distribution, not least his eye-catching cross-field diagonal passes.

Nedim BAJRAMI
(Albania)

After representing Switzerland, his country of birth, in every category from the U15s to the U21s, the cultured attacking midfielder plumped, in 2021, to throw in his lot with Albania, the land of his parents. He has since become absolutely integral to the Eagles' attack.

Jeremy DOKU
(Belgium)

His self-confidence boosted by a highly satisfactory first season in the Premier League with Manchester City, the former Rennes left-winger is very much revelling in his new status as one of Belgium's go-to players. Since moving to England in a £55.4m deal last August, the 22-year-old has added a touch more thought and all-round effectiveness to his stellar ball-skills and elusiveness, paving the way for an automatic spot in the plans of *Diables Rouges* coach Domenico Tedesco. While Romelu Lukaku voraciously hammers in the goals at the point of the attack, Doku effectively is the maverick with a drill, punching holes in the opposition rearguard with his quick changes of direction and stop-go qualities.

When he signed for City, some pundits claimed he was too mercurial to ever become a "system" player in Pep Guardiola's Sky Blue machine. The naysayers were wrong, however. Given plenty of freedom to delve into his dribbling bag of tricks, Doku has swiftly emerged as a potent weapon for City, especially dangerous in the havoc-wreaking role of impact substitute. "He's surprised us," declared Guardiola. "He reads each action well and knows what he has to do and makes the right decisions. It would be hard to find a better dribbler in reduced spaces. Over the first five metres, he is one of the quickest."

Arthur Theate, the Belgium defender who knows Doku well from their days together at Ligue 1 Rennes, describes his old team-mate as "almost impossible to defend against" and few would disagree. "He's unique in the world," added Theate. "You can try to slow him up, but it's really difficult to take the ball away from him."

Antonin BARAK
(Czech Republic)

Like so many elegant left-footed playmakers, the number one attribute of the Fiorentina man is the ease with which he can manipulate the ball. Potent with long shots and a free-kick expert.

Florinel COMAN
(Romania)

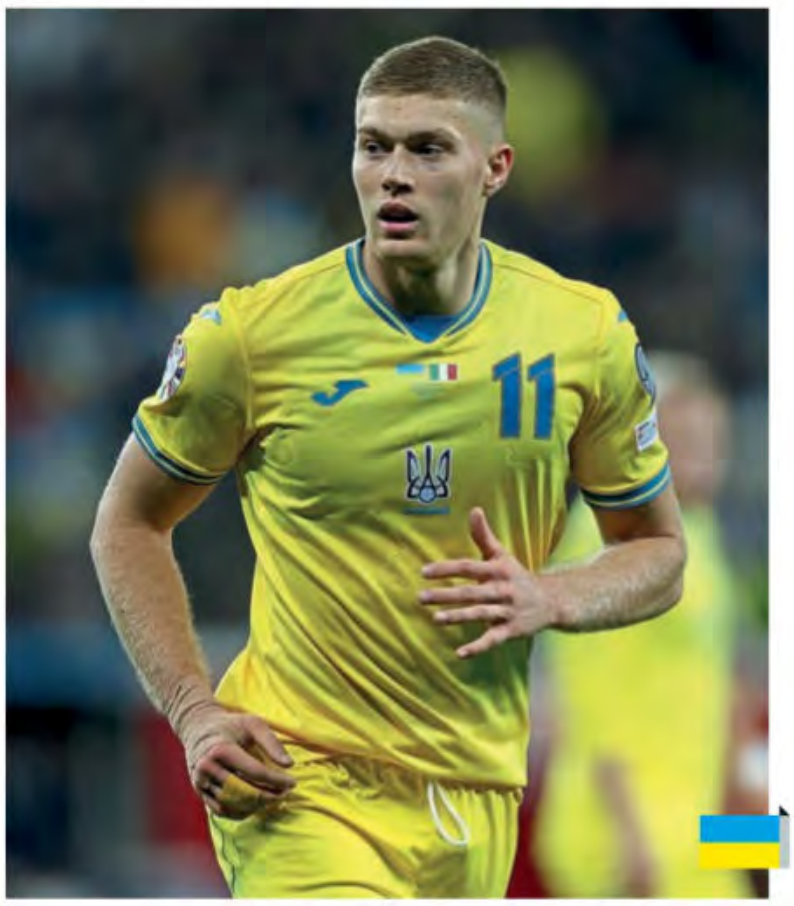
Arguably Romania's most expressive talent at the moment, the 26-year-old FCSB left-winger, dubbed the "Romanian Mbappe", was the lynchpin of his club's domestic league triumph in 2023-24, topping the scoring charts.

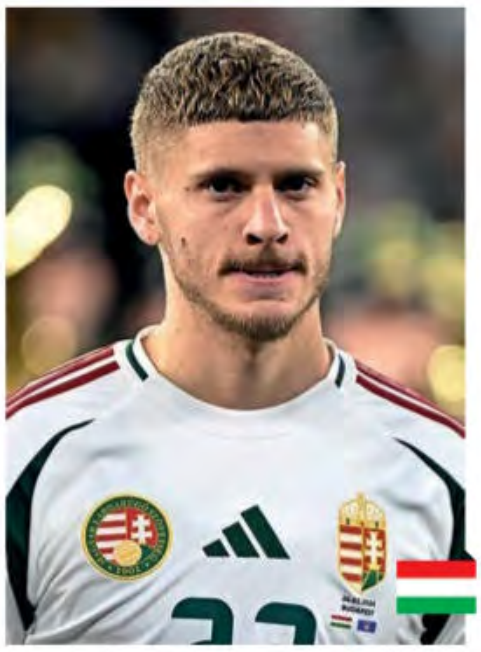
Artem DOVBYK
(Ukraine)

Boasting an outstanding trio of Spanish-based attackers in Valencia front-man Roman Yaremchuk and the Girona double act of winger Viktor Tsyhankov and striker Artem Dovbyk, Ukraine very much cut a La Liga dash going forward. While all three have an abundance of individual qualities, the latter is the one with the most pressure on his shoulders at these continental finals. In his first season in the Spanish top flight following a €7.75m switch from Dnipro-1, the 26-year-old *goleador* has taken Spain by storm, his sharpshooting prowess laying the foundations for Girona's remarkable Champions League qualification.

Who would have guessed back in August that Dovbyk would go on to outscore the likes of seasoned goal-getters Antoine Griezmann, Alvaro Morata, Robert Lewandowski and Vinicius Junior? And to think that many Spanish football insiders were not at all convinced when Girona first signed him, describing him as a blunt front-line instrument who lacked technical polish and precision. In fact, he has turned out to be the complete package, both powerfully voracious inside the penalty box and of a high standard creatively outside of it, especially good at detecting space and playing in runners.

His devastating six-minute hat-trick in Girona's 5-1 drubbing of Sevilla in January told the story of a striker capable of scoring every which way: a towering header at the far post, a simple first-touch finish after a lightning-quick Girona counter-attack, and an impressive solo run from outside the box, ending the diagonal burst with a steady left-footed finish.





Marton DARDAI
(Hungary)

The fast-improving Hertha Berlin left-sided centre-back or defensive midfielder, 22, is the third Magyar international in his family after father Pal – who has coached both Hungary and Hertha – and brother Palko.

Berat DJIMSITI
(Albania)

Excellent centre-back who is a key figure for both Albania and his Italian club Atalanta. No player won more challenges than him in the 2023-24 Europa League, while he also played every minute in Euro 2024 qualifying for his country after missing the first game through injury.

Youssouf FOFANA
(France)

Any team crossing swords with the French at Euro 2024 this summer would be well advised not to give Fofana the time and the space to take a pot-shot from outside the penalty area. This season, the Monaco midfielder has scored three long-distance goals for *Les Bleus*, powerfully and accurately smashing the ball into the back of the net in European Championship qualifiers against Greece and Gibraltar and the March friendly against Chile. What's more, the 25-year-old has the ability to let fly with either foot.

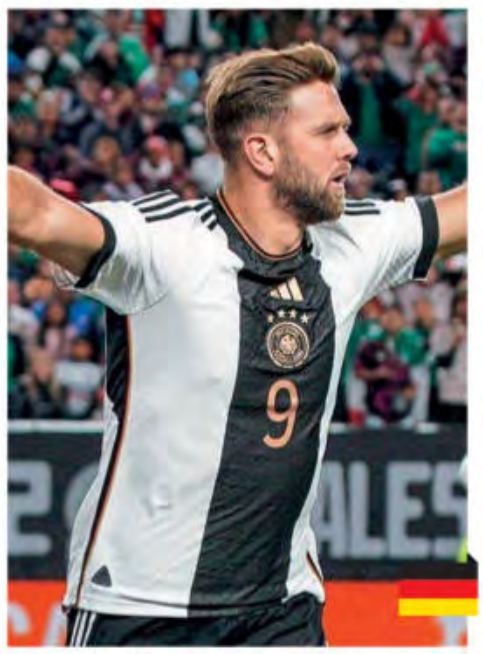
With the likes of Adrien Rabiot, Aurelien Tchouameni, Warren Zaire-Emery and Eduardo Camavinga also in contention for a spot in the French engine room – along with World Cup-winning veteran N'Golo Kante, who received a shock recall after almost two years out of the picture – Fofana is far from guaranteed a starting berth. But his case for inclusion may be hard for France coach Didier Deschamps to resist. He has the experience – featuring in six of France's seven games at the last World Cup and in five of their eight Euro 2024 qualifiers – and is a fine all-rounder with bags of aggression, mobility, energy, dynamism, physicality and purpose. Not only is he excellent in defensive mode – a consummate ball-winner, always on hand for a key interception and a relentless pursuer of opposition counter-attackers – he also distributes the ball with much care and has oodles of ball-carrying ability.

This European Championship could be a very important shop window for this omnipresent midfielder. After four-and-a-half seasons with Monaco, whom he joined from Strasbourg for €15m in January 2020, he has hinted that he would not be against a change of scenery and, with his current contract due to expire in 12 months, his club may be tempted to cash in.

The likes of Manchester United, Arsenal, Milan, Juventus, Atletico Madrid and his hometown club Paris Saint-Germain are all reportedly watching and waiting.

Przemyslaw FRANKOWSKI
(Poland)

Ligue 1 club Lens have a long and proud tradition of employing outstanding Polish players and the indefatigable right-sided midfield piston – previously of Lechia Gdansk, Jagiellonia Bialystok and Chicago Fire – is the latest example: adaptable, speedy and resolute.



Niclas FULLKRUG
(Germany)

Borussia Dortmund's 31-year-old striker, a bustling, old-school type centre-forward, is enjoying a rewarding autumn to his career, a prolific goalscorer for both club and country. May have to be content with an impact sub's role, but he certainly offers the Germans something different.

Jeremie FRIMPONG
(Netherlands)

Fresh from starring in Bayer Leverkusen's wonderful Bundesliga-winning odyssey, the right-sided wing-back or full-back is now steeling himself for the next challenge: carving out a niche for himself in the *Oranje* line-up. The former Manchester City academy pupil and Celtic flyer, 23, has featured only infrequently for the Netherlands thus far, forced to play second-fiddle to Internazionale's highly experienced Denzel Dumfries. But could a changing of the guard be imminent?

For the last couple of seasons, Frimpong has been nothing less than a German league sensation, catching the eye with his bullet-from-a-gun speed, superb dribbling skills, incredible powers of endurance (40-plus sprints per game) and precision crosses. In modern parlance, he goes "vertical" from first minute to last, always looking to make deep inroads into enemy territory and almost impossible to contain when he moves into top gear.

Under the influence of Leverkusen boss Xabi Alonso, Frimpong has learnt to reflect a little more too, no longer seeing the all-action setting as his only option. "I see a more grown up Jerry," says Alonso. "He was very influential last season, but now has a better understanding of why we look to do certain things, with less emphasis on transition actions and more control."

It's not inconceivable that Netherlands boss Ronald Koeman picks both Frimpong and Dumfries, using the former as a right-winger in a 4-3-3 system. Another possibility would be to use the Leverkusen star at left-back, where he used to play in the Manchester City youth ranks.

Alex GRIMALDO
(Spain)

Shining alongside Frimpong at Bayer Leverkusen is left wing-back Grimaldo, who effectively serves as a technically-gifted playmaker on that flank. A new face in the Spanish squad at the grand old age of 28, he will likely vie with Jose Gaya to start at left-back.

David HANCKO
(Slovakia)

High quality left-footed central defender or left-back who, in two seasons in the Netherlands with Feyenoord, has come on by leaps and bounds, winning the Eredivisie title in 2022-23. There is lots of Premier League interest in the 26-year-old.

Michael GREGORITSCH
(Austria)

Under coach Ralf Rangnick, Austria's most significant asset is their ability to win the ball back from the opposition as high up the pitch as possible, and when they do their first instinct is to look to play in their ever-alert striker Gregoritsch. The 30-year-old Freiburg star, who in March netted a fine hat-trick in a 6-1 friendly thumping of Turkey in Vienna – the first Austrian to achieve such a feat in 18 long years – is one of those international performers whose lot is to be underestimated, never in receipt of the kudos he is due. It's a strange state of affairs for someone with nine years of national team duty, over 50 caps and who certainly is not short of qualities, not least his strength in the air, hold-up play, good technique, intelligence and talent as a finisher.

With Austria's veteran talismanic front-man Marko Arnautovic laid low by hamstring trouble in recent times, Gregoritsch has led the line admirably, scoring nine international goals in the last two seasons, more than any other Austrian. He also is something of a national team lucky charm: in his 50-plus internationals, he has been on the winning side 30 times, a ratio only bettered by three Austria internationals in the country's 122-year football history.

Much of Gregoritsch's lack of recognition is due to misplaced envy and silly claims that he has friends in high places. His father Werner is the Austria Under-21s' long-serving coach, and Michael has grown used to having the nepotism allegation thrown at him. Unfairly so, insists national team-mate Christoph Baumgartner: "I've been aware of Michael's qualities for a long time but I'm not sure whether everyone in Austria is."

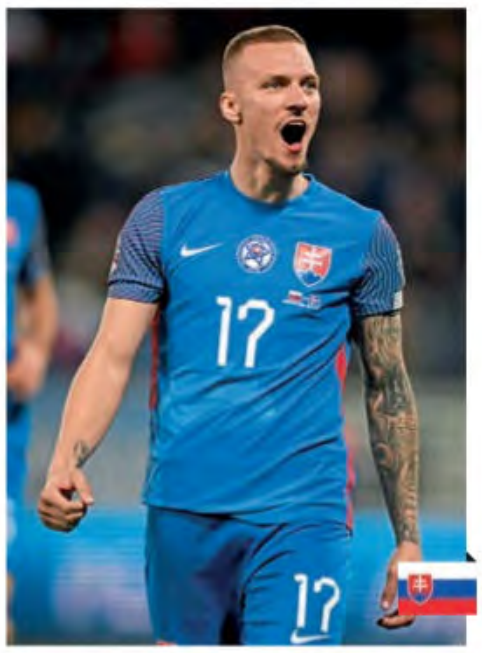
Peter GULACSI
(Hungary)

No Hungarian would have been happier than Gulacsi at the end of the Magyars' 1-0 friendly victory over Turkey in Budapest in March. Back on national team duty after an 18-month absence due to a cruciate ligament injury, the towering RB Leipzig keeper gave a brilliant Man-of-the-Match performance, time and time again foiling the Turks with his impeccable shot-stopping instincts and bravery. Just like old times for Gulacsi, who has won over 50 caps in a decade of service to the team in cherry red.

"It was a great moment to make my comeback," said the 34-year-old, whose last international came in a 2-0 loss to Italy in September 2022. "I was playing again in front of our home crowd, we managed to beat Turkey and I think I had a good game. I feel as though I'm getting back to my best."

With Gulacsi unavailable for such a long time, Denes Dibusz of Ferencvaros did an excellent job of filling in, much to the fore as the Magyars topped their Euro 2024 qualifying group. Even so, Gulacsi is much the better keeper, as well as being more experienced (boasting over 200 Bundesliga games in RB colours and 35 Champions League appearances for the club).

Beneath the glacial exterior he usually presents on the pitch, Gulacsi is a tremendous competitor, not one to easily give up the ghost. Thoughts of taking part in Euro 2024 kept him going during the dark days of his rehabilitation. He dearly wanted to be involved, particularly with the tournament taking place in Germany and Hungary scheduled to face the *Nationalmannschaft* in Group A.



Lukas HARASLIN
(Slovakia)

In counter-attack mode, the Slovakians take their cues from the directness and pace of the Sparta Prague left-winger. Now thriving in the Czech Republic after stints at Sassuolo and Parma, either side of a five-year spell in Poland at Lechia Gdansk.

Luka IVANUSEC
(Croatia)

The Feyenoord left-winger can blow hot and cold, but when the stars align, his trickery is very hard to nullify. Won a record 28 caps for Croatia's Under-21s, and was named in the 2021 European Under-21 Championship Team of the Tournament.

Rasmus HOJLUND
(Denmark)

Even the most partisan disciple of Manchester United would be hard-pressed to claim that the young Danish striker has been a resounding success in his first season at Old Trafford following a £72 million move from Atalanta. A return of just ten Premier League goals was not what United envisaged when they made the 21-year-old their seventh biggest transfer of all-time.

But that's not to say that he cannot come good at the Euros. The Danes' top scorer in qualification with seven goals, he may secretly be glad to have a break from United, going from an under-achieving club in constant crisis and the media goldfish bowl, to the close-knit confines of the national team.

If the Danes have any sense, they will play to Hojlund's strengths, something

United generally have failed to do. Give young Rasmus a good supply of service from the wings, and his power, strength and finishing will do the rest. For United, he has often had to plough a lone furrow, regularly ignored by the solo artists out wide like Antony and Alejandro Garnacho. Whoever plays on the flanks for Denmark – whether it be wing-backs Joakim Maehle and Victor Kristiansen or winger Mikkel Damsgaard – must put in those crosses. As he proved with his five goals in the Champions League this campaign and a purple midwinter patch in the Premier League – when he amassed seven goals in six games – he is no mean executioner.

Much will depend on how well he starts the tournament in Germany. A good showing in the Danes' opening match against Slovenia in Stuttgart will set him up perfectly for the next encounter, the clash with England in Frankfurt, where he will probably go head-to-head with his Manchester United team-mate Harry Maguire.

Erik JANZA
(Slovenia)

One of Slovenia's favoured attacking options is to use the speed, incisiveness and energy of their ever-adventurous full-back. Packs a mean shot, especially from set-pieces. Made the left-back spot his own, winning the majority of his caps in qualifying.

Ferdi KADIOGLU
(Turkey)

A rising star of the Turkish game, the 24-year-old Fenerbahce hot prospect is flexibility personified, able to impress in either full-back position and any number of slots in the midfield. Arsenal are rumoured to be monitoring him.

Gregor KOBEL
(Switzerland)

No one in the Swiss camp would be at all concerned if anything untoward happened to first-choice goalkeeper Yann Sommer, the man between the sticks for Italian champions Internazionale.

Kobel, who currently serves as Sommer's national team understudy, is an outstanding last-line-of-defence in his own right, not only the most accomplished custodian in the Bundesliga at the moment – named in the league's Team of the Season both this season and last campaign – but also among the best in this term's Champions League, making more saves than any other goalkeeper on Borussia Dortmund's road to the final.

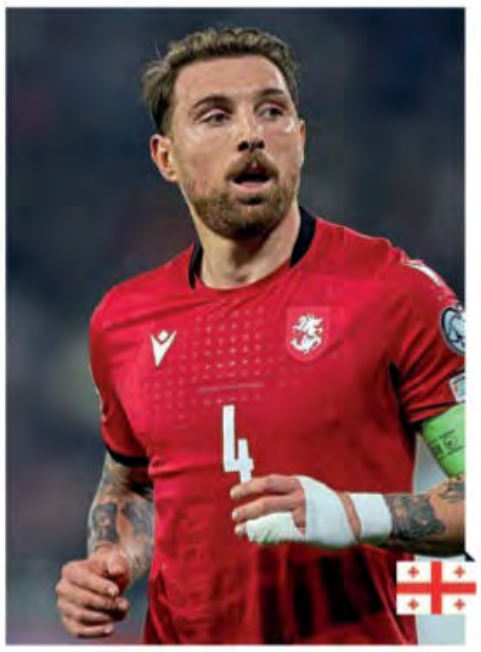
Loud, opinionated and more than a little cocky, Kobel's titanium-like self-assuredness can, on occasion, alienate. In a Swiss TV documentary about the national team's preparations for the 2022 Qatar World Cup, the beady eye of the camera caught him having a heated argument with goalkeeping coach Patrick Foletti on the eve of a warm-up match versus England at Wembley. The reason for the dispute? The breaking news that Sommer, absent with COVID, would be replaced in goal by Jonas Omlin rather than Kobel. His pride hurt, he certainly let rip.

Yet Kobel, the son of a Swiss ice hockey pro, usually backs up his high opinion of himself. Excellent in his reflexes, in one-on-one situations, positionally and with a commanding presence, he has vastly improved his ability on the ball too.

"Greg has developed with us into a world-class goalkeeper," says Sebastian Kehl, Dortmund's director of sport. "And he will get even better."

The only drawback is his tendency to pick up more than his fair share of muscular injuries, which Dortmund are most concerned about. He is reported to have consulted an osteopath in Zurich.

When the 35-year-old Sommer is eventually replaced in Switzerland's goal, they will have a ready-made successor. Kobel will be doing everything to make sure that that day comes this summer.

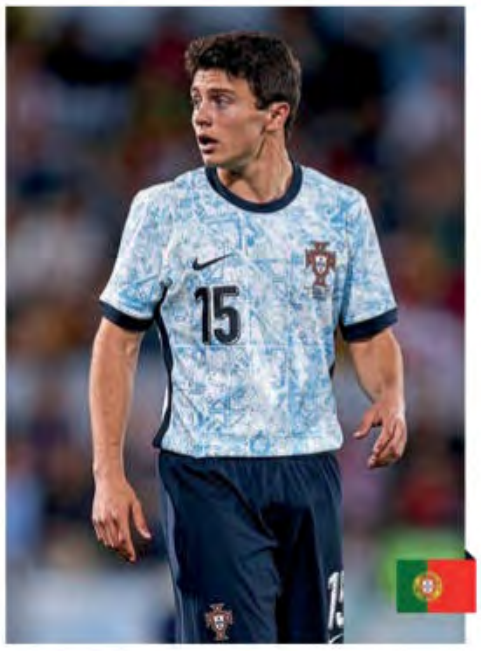


Guram KASHIA
(Georgia)

Abrasive centre-back, skipper and emotional leader of the tournament debutants. Georgia's Footballer of the Year in 2012 and 2013, he plays for top Slovak club Slovan Bratislava. Spent eight seasons in the Eredivisie with Vitesse.

Randal KOLO MUANI
(France)

Enigma of a striker, who recently pulled out all the stops in a Man-of-the-Match display for *Les Bleus* against Chile and featured prominently in the World Cup final, but has yet to settle at PSG following a €90m move from Eintracht Frankfurt.



Joao NEVES
(Portugal)

It speaks volumes that the brilliant Benfica midfield all-rounder, who at just 19 years old is already the club's key player, is being linked with some of the biggest teams across Europe. Ball-skills and quick-thinking allied to incredible tenacity.

Dani OLMO
(Spain)

With Gavi still recovering from his torn ACL, Spain coach Luis de la Fuente has recently chosen to switch the guile and perceptiveness of the RB Leipzig star from a wide role to the number ten position, though still expect Olmo to regularly drift out wide to the left.

Kobbie MAINOO
(England)

Never mind the fact that the teenager has played fewer than 40 first-team matches for Manchester United and percisely zero minutes of competitive international football. Proficiency has no regards for a birth certificate and, as the 19-year-old central midfielder proved in his first start for England against Belgium in March, he undoubtedly belongs at this level.

Up against a strong Belgian XI, the Stockport-born graduate of the United academy offered a Man-of-the-Match performance, thrilling the Wembley crowd with his assurance on the ball, crisp passing through the lines, well-timed advances and combativeness. Not bad at all for a youngster who only made his full Premier League debut for United last November.

England boss Gareth Southgate must have been delighted to note how easily Mainoo found his bearings in the Three Lions' engine room, how he quickly established a chemistry and understanding with the likes of Declan Rice and Jude Bellingham. The kid is not just one for the future. His relevance is in the here and now.

"He gives us a different midfield profile to anything else we've got," said Southgate of Mainoo after the Belgium game. "You really can't believe his age. His attributes are there for everybody to see, that ability to receive under pressure and ride challenges, to manipulate the ball in tight areas."

Ostensibly a deep-lying midfielder, noted for his ability to take care of the ball in tight spaces and build attacks, as well as his tenacity in tackling, Mainoo has also displayed an attacking box-to-box threat in his fledgling career thus far, notching impressive and important goals against Wolverhampton Wanderers, Liverpool and Newcastle United.

Given Jordan Henderson's shock omission from the Euro 2024 squad, Trent Alexander-Arnold's failure to fully convince as an international midfielder, and Southgate's reluctance to play Declan Rice as a lone pivot, the teenager from Stockport has a very good chance of playing a key role for England in Germany.

Strahinja PAVLOVIC
(Serbia)

The 23-year-old mountain range of a centre-back – currently featuring for Austrian outfit Red Bull Salzburg – is rumoured to be on the radar of the likes of Roma, Juventus and Brighton. The left-footer is the epitome of fighting spirit and attitude.

Tijjani REIJNDERS
(Netherlands)

In the space of just 12 months, the forceful Milan midfield maestro, comfortable in old football parlance as a "wing-half" or part of a double pivot pairing, has gone from relative unknown to quasi-undisputed national teamer.

Giorgi MAMARDASHVILI
(Georgia)

On the eve of their first-ever major international tournament, Georgia supporters can take a great deal of heart from the solid-as-a-rock presence between the posts of the ever-improving Valencia custodian. When the Georgia defence wobbles, the steeple-tall 23-year-old invariably comes to the rescue and he proved the hero of the hour in the play-off final against Greece, tipping the balance in his side's favour in the penalty shootout with a strong left-handed block of Anastasios Bakasetas' effort. In fact, seeing off spot-kicks is a Mamardashvili speciality; he has saved three in La Liga this season, more than any other Spanish top-flight keeper.

With Valencia since 2021, whom he joined from Dinamo Tbilisi, Mamardashvili has enjoyed the best campaign of his career in 2023-24, an indispensable figure in a Valencia back-line that is one of the least charitable in Spain. As consistent as he is agile, athletic and focused, he has more La Liga clean sheets than ever before (12 by early May) and never seems to be injured. In February, he played in his 63rd consecutive La Liga game for Valencia, a club record for a keeper.

He is currently under contract at Valencia until 2027, but a transfer to an English club that plays in Europe is not out of the question. Valencia, who rate him in the €25-30m bracket, are already making plans to replace him, setting up a Bosman free deal for Rayo Vallecano and North Macedonia goalie Stole Dimitrievski. When Real Madrid number one Thibaut Courtois tore his ACL early this season, the Bernabeu brass initially had plans to bring in the Georgian as the locum. Valencia, though, would not play ball.

Mateo RETEGUI
(Italy)

The *Azzurri* are reaping rich rewards from the decision of Genoa's Argentine-born striker to exploit his Sicilian lineage and opt to play for Italy, as demonstrated by four goals in his first six internationals. Will vie with the in-form Gianluca Scamacca for Italy's No.9 berth.

Romano SCHMID
(Austria)

The Werder Bremen attacking midfielder's combativeness and versatility should be a huge asset to Ralf Rangnick's side. The Sturm Graz academy graduate, who has also played for Wolfsberger and Liefering, combines craft, aggression and industry, plus accurate dead-ball deliveries.

Nuno MENDES
(Portugal)

Portugal boss Roberto Martinez is spoilt for choice when it comes to the left-back position – Bayern Munich's Raphael Guerreiro hasn't even made the final squad, while Barca's Joao Cancelo and Diogo Dalot of Manchester United can both play on either flank – yet the return to fitness of Nuno Mendes could give the former Belgium coach a real boost. The Paris Saint-Germain man is now fully operational after spending ten months on the sidelines with an extremely complex hamstring injury. Mendes, still only 21, made his long-awaited return to the PSG ranks in February and has quickly re-established himself as the first-choice left-back in the pecking order of coach Luis Enrique.

Out of the national team picture for a full year, the former Sporting starlet was brought back for Portugal's 5-2 friendly thrashing of Sweden in March and though time is tight in the battle to secure a starting slot, it would be no surprise if he was to be a main man in Germany. Put simply, no other Portuguese left-back can offer the same dynamism and fire in the feet. Explosive going forward, irresistible in one-on-ones, a good crosser of the ball and regularly moving inside into shooting positions, he represents a major threat to any defence. A thunder and lightning alliance on the left flank with Milan winger Rafael Leao could be a huge difference-maker for Martinez and company.

"Nuno has recovered well from his injury and plays for a big club, one where the expectations are high and his performances have to be at an optimal level," said Martinez prior to the Sweden game. "He's a different type of full-back. He gives us another important option."

Lorenzo PELLEGRINI

(Italy)

Azzurri boss Luciano Spalletti, a coach with a passion for bright, inventive and versatile figures at the creative controls, must be delighted with the recent awakening of the Roma skipper.

Pellegrini, 27, who shone very brightly indeed in a recent 2-0 friendly win over Ecuador in New York – opening the scoring after just three minutes with a marvellous left-footed strike from the edge of the box and putting on a five-star playmaking show – has been arguably Serie A's most in-form player in the second half of this season. The goals certainly are flowing: seven in 15 games for club and country between late January and late March, exactly the same number he compiled in his previous 50 competitive outings.

As most Italian commentators have mischievously noted, the spark which ignited the Pellegrini blaze was the sacking in January of erstwhile Roma head honcho Jose Mourinho, who had clearly fallen out of love with his captain, only regarding him as bench fodder. The Special One's exit presented Lorenzo with a much-needed lifeline. The new man in charge, long-serving ex-Roma midfielder Daniele De Rossi, immediately re-installed him to the team, more than happy to put total faith in him and hand him an all-singing, all-dancing role. With the chains removed, Pellegrini has truly flourished. "I need to feel free in midfield, to find my own way, to look for where the spaces open up and to follow those opportunities. This is what I've been lacking for the last year-and-a-half."

Sandro Tonali's betting ban and the loss of form of Marco Verratti had left the Italians short-handed in midfield; Pellegrini may be the answer.

Matz SELS

(Belgium)

Thanks to his outstanding displays in the Euro 2024 warm-up fixtures against the Republic of Ireland and England, the Nottingham Forest goalkeeper may well have edged in front of Wolfsburg's Koen Casteels in the pecking order.

Lawrence SHANKLAND

(Scotland)

Despite squandering a gilt-edged scoring opportunity in a springtime friendly defeat to the Netherlands, the Hearts striker is anything but a no-hoper, the most prolific marksman in the 2023-24 Scottish top flight.

Benjamin SESKO

(Slovenia)

Anyone unaware of the importance of the much-coveted RB Leipzig striker to the Slovenians should take a look at the highlights of his side's recent 2-0 friendly win over mighty Portugal in Ljubljana. Sesko, 21, led the line brilliantly throughout, bristling with muscle, imagination and awareness. The Portuguese defence never came close to shutting down the young giant and, as well as going close to scoring on a couple of occasions, he deftly set up Adam Cerin for the opening goal of the game.

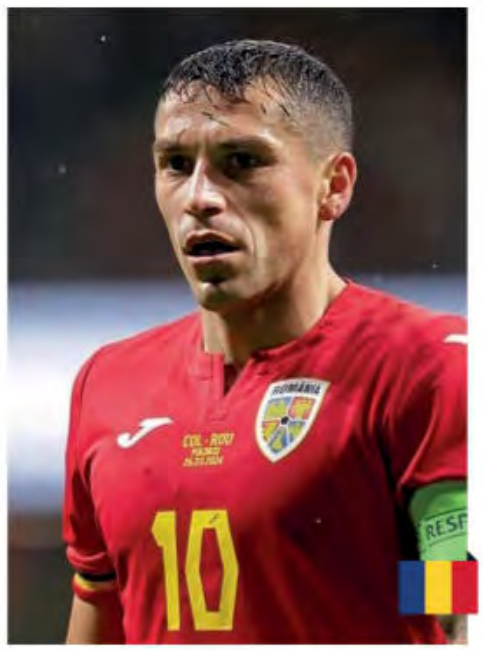
Sesko, who scored five times in qualifying, will enter Euro 2024 full of confidence. This season, his first in the German Bundesliga following a €24m move from Red Bull Salzburg, he has more than lived up to the boy wonder tag – too tall, too strong in the air, too powerful and too clever in his movement for markers to handle and regularly on the scoresheet in all competitions. "He has everything in his game: the speed, aerial ability, goal sense, mobility and technique," said RB's former technical director Christopher Vivell. "He's a unique and special player."

RB will be extremely relieved that Sesko has a release clause linked to performances. In January, he could have exited the *Roten Bullen* for just €50m, but since then the figure has risen to €65m, and the buyout clause could go further north of that mark later this summer.

Premier League heavyweights such as Arsenal, Manchester United and Chelsea are reportedly tracking the situation. According to the rumour mill, his agent has been seen at Arsenal, but Milan are thought to be on the case too, regarding him as the successor to veteran front-man Olivier Giroud.

Vincent SIERRO
(Switzerland)

Late-developing Toulouse midfield general who has captained the club, and had to wait until the age of 28 for his first international cap for the *Nati*. Very intelligent on and off the field; he has a degree in business studies.



Nicolae STANCIU
(Romania)

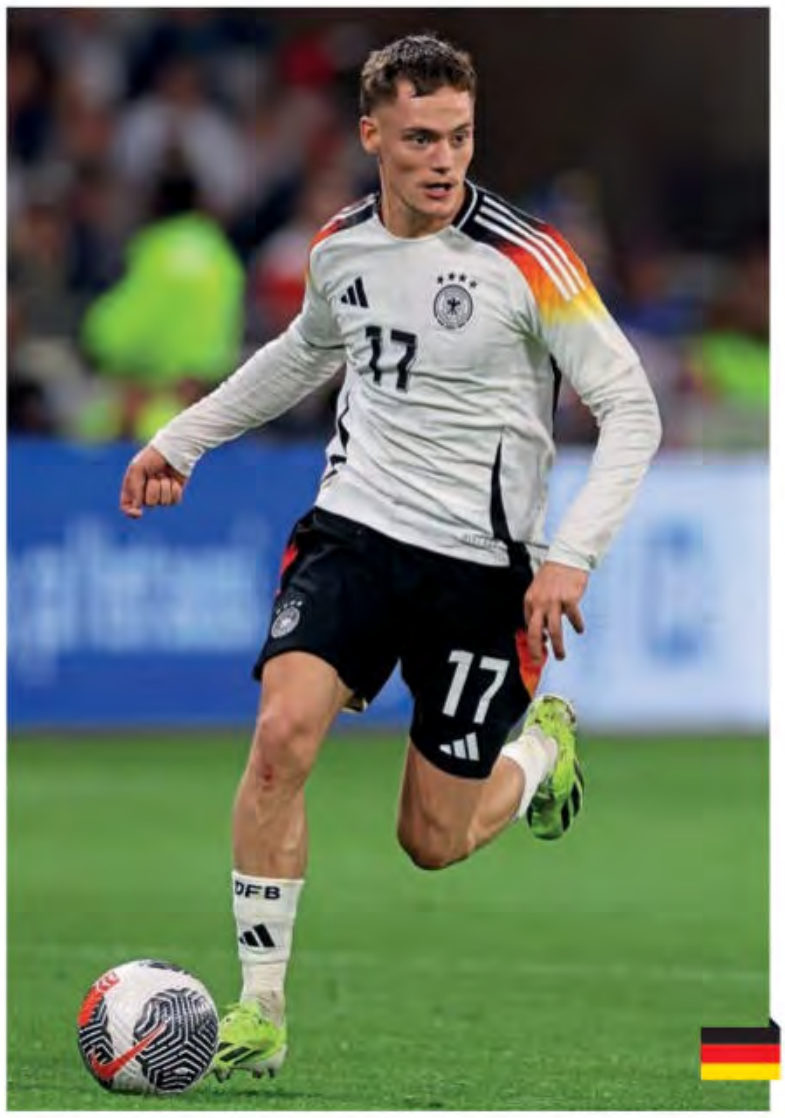
Clever, diminutive attacking midfielder, full of vision and purpose, who skippered Romania throughout the Euro qualifying campaign. Has earned a living in three European countries, as well as China and Saudi Arabia.

Florian WIRTZ
(Germany)

If the Leverkusen boy wonder succeeds in translating his scintillating club form of 2023-24 to the European Championship arena, the *Nationalmannschaft* will be in a very healthy place.

Widely and deservedly lauded as the best player in the Bundesliga this term, the 21-year-old attacking midfielder proved the cornerstone of Bayer's total domination of the German top flight, a fairy-tale turn of events which were largely predicated on the youngster's rare mix of technical brilliance, creative imagination and electric surges. With a grand total of 11 goals and 11 assists, he contributed to almost a quarter of Leverkusen's total Bundesliga output.

Fernando Carro, Leverkusen's chief executive, recently declared that his prized asset was worth €150m, and it is hard to disagree. Growing up, Wirtz was a fan of Germany and Werder Bremen winger Marko Marin, but he was recently described by German sports publication *Kicker* as a cross between Luka Modric and Leo Messi.

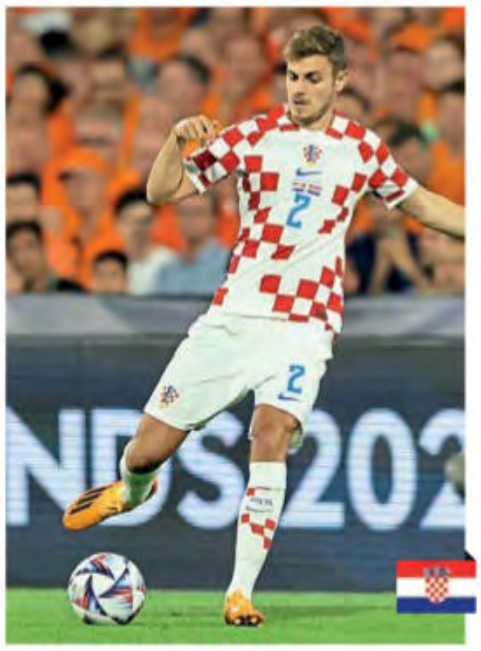


Such gushing praise will inevitably fuel sky-high expectations at this summer's Euros, though up to now, he has never let the hype adversely affect him. Unlike the vast majority of game-changer types, he simply loves to graft and scrap.

One third of an exceptional trio of national team number tens alongside Jamal Musiala and Ilkay Gundogan, Wirtz scored his first goal for Germany in March, opening the scoring in a 2-0 friendly win in France with a thunderous effort just seven seconds into the match. Never before has a Germany international netted a quicker goal.

That was the latest in a long line of records held by Wirtz. Leverkusen's youngest-ever player and, briefly, the youngest goalscorer in Bundesliga history after bursting onto the scene in May 2020, he may already have wider acclaim were it not for an ACL injury picked up in 2022, which cost him his place at that year's World Cup.

Now he has his chance to shine at Euro 2024 and, with no fewer than nine siblings (one of whom, Juliane, plays football for Werder Bremen women's team), he will not be short of support.



Josip STANISIC
(Croatia)

Bayern Munich miscalculated when they agreed to send their homegrown central defender or full-back on loan to Leverkusen for the 2023-24 season. Now a Bundesliga champion with the Rhinelander – even scoring in the league versus his parent club.

Heorhiy SUDAKOV
(Ukraine)

The extremely classy Shakhtar Donetsk schemer was at his most influential in the play-off final win over Iceland, creating both the team's goals. Looks certain to move west imminently, with Premier League teams circling.

Lamine YAMAL
(Spain)

Don't expect the 16-year-old Barcelona winger to be overawed on his major tournament debut this summer. In 12 months in the Barca first team and within a handful of appearances for *La Roja*, the whizz-kid has never shown the slightest hint of stage fright – quite the opposite, in fact. Anything that he pulls off on the pitch – the tricks, the feints and general one-on-one virtuosity – is executed with complete and utter fearlessness. He totally relies on his instincts, as though playing the game for his own amusement.

Since establishing himself as a regular starter at club level early this year, Yamal has gone from strength to strength, with several Man-of-the-Match accolades. He was absolutely magical in Barcelona's 3-1 victory over Napoli in a Champions League last-16 second leg, and produced an even better display as Spain and Brazil drew 3-3 in a friendly in March at the Bernabeu. In a masterclass display of speed, dribbling artistry and impudence, he simply could not be stopped, constantly outsmarting would-be markers and involved in all three of Spain's goals. In testament to his display that night, the Bernabeu crowd – usually so hostile to anyone with a Barca connection – gave him a standing ovation upon his substitution, echoing the treatment famously given to Ronaldinho in November 2005 – almost two years before Yamal was born.

It is a frightening thought that a player so young could already be so key for a team like Spain, less than a year after he became their youngest-ever player at 16 years and 57 days. Concerns have been raised about the workload and expectations placed on a player who turns 17 the day before the Euros final, yet he has become undroppable for club and country.

The brilliant left-footer is thought to be Paris Saint-Germain's first choice to replace the outgoing Kylian Mbappe. Accoring to club president Joan Laporta, Barca have already turned down an offer of €200m.

Dusan TADIC
(Serbia)

Veteran left-footed talisman still going strong for Fenerbahce and his country at 35. In March, he became the most-capped player in Serbian national team history with 106 appearances.

A full international since 2008, he has served as national team skipper for the past eight years and appeared in all his country's games at the last two World Cups. Apart from his ever-imaginative prompting, superb dribbling ability and infectious will-to-win, another weapon in his armoury is his flexibility, his comfort in all areas in the attacking third: on either flank, calling the creative shots through the middle or even as a second striker, intelligently playing off a target man.

Serbia's Player of the Year in 2016, 2019 and 2021, he enjoyed his most rewarding spell at club level with Ajax, accumulating industrial numbers for goals and assists between 2018 and 2023. Arguably Ajax's most influential performer when reaching the Champions League semi-finals in 2018-19.

Kenan YILDIZ
(Turkey)

Turkey might just have an ace in the hole in the shape of the 19-year-old Juventus second-striker or left-winger. The German-born youngster only has limited top-level experience, normally used as a substitute in Serie A and with precious few senior appearances for the Turkey national team, but he is clearly a phenomenal talent.

A virtuoso with an adhesive touch, powers of acceleration and sharp changes of direction, Yildiz makes the impossible look amazingly ordinary. Take the goal he netted in the 6-1 Coppa Italia victory over Salernitana in January: as smooth as silk as he cut in from the left, danced his way past a string of defenders and calmly slotted home.

It was the same prodigious story in Turkey's friendly with Germany in Berlin in November, a night when he thrashed in an unstoppable finish from the most acute of angles and repeatedly put embarrassed defenders on the back foot with his speed and dribbling skills.

"We can see in training what Yildiz is all about," says Turkey defender Kaan Ayhan. "He is young and carefree. That helps in front of a big crowd. It's good to have a young kid on the wing who makes life difficult for the opposition and gives us [players] at the back some respite."

Yildiz came through the Bayern Munich youth ranks before being inexplicably allowed to join Juventus on a free transfer in the summer of 2022. Many rightly believe that Bayern dropped the ball. Back in August, Juventus wisely decided to extend his contract with them until 2027.

Bart VERBRUGGEN
(Netherlands)

Tremendously capable young Brighton goalkeeper, who has elbowed his way to the front of the national team queue this season and was sensational in the March friendly defeat to Germany.

Although on the losing side that night in Frankfurt, he was an almost universal choice for Man of the Match, pulling off no fewer than three world-class saves to deny goal-bound efforts from the *Nationalmannschaft* trio of Maximilian Mittelstadt, Jamal Musiala and Thomas Muller. It's hard to believe that this most self-assured of characters is just 21 and only has a handful of senior national team appearances to his name.

Palpably ambitious – so much so that he speaks openly about his desire to become the best keeper in the world – Verbruggen has particularly improved his ball-playing skills and distribution in recent times under the club stewardship of Roberto De Zerbi – a facet of his game that *Oranje* boss Ronald Koeman has showered with praise. Bayern Munich reportedly see him as possible long-term replacement for the veteran Manuel Neuer.

Ollie WATKINS
(England)

Watkins' incredible season, featuring goals and assists aplenty, presents Gareth Southgate with a headache: does he tweak his usual shape in order to fit the Aston Villa man in alongside captain Harry Kane, or keep him in reserve to make an impact off the bench?

David ZIMA
(Czech Republic)

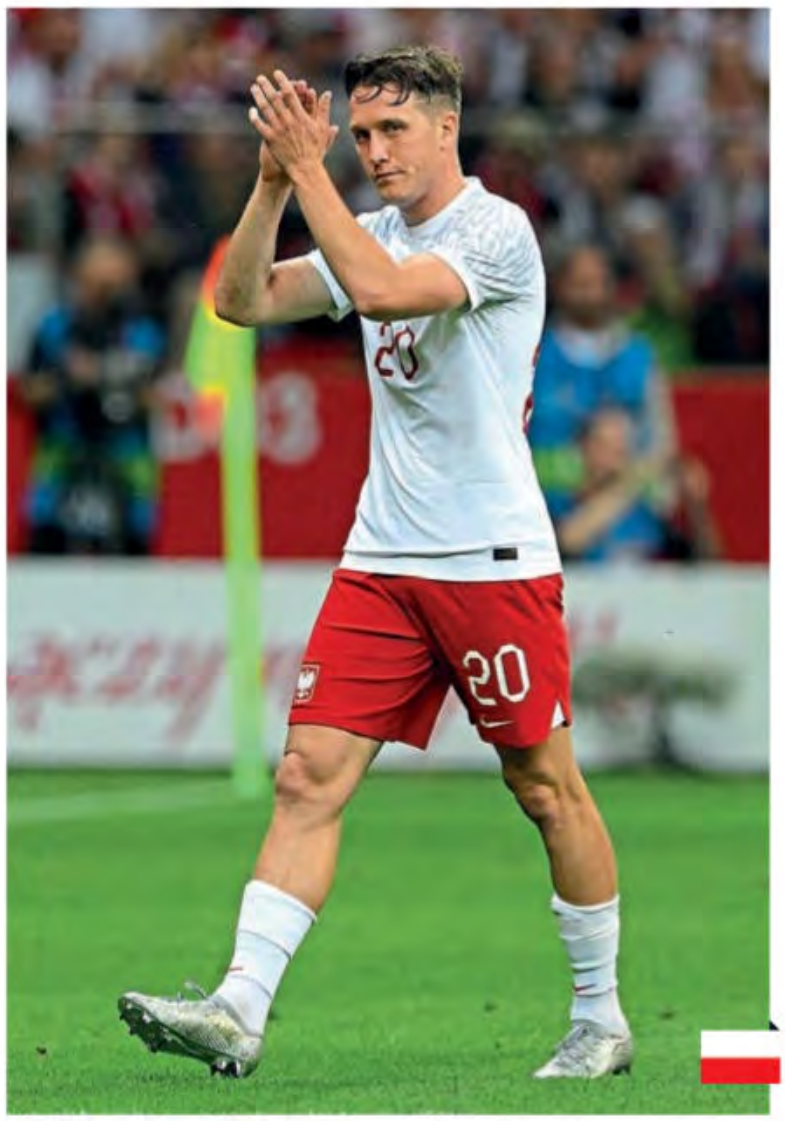
It has been an eventful year for the watchful centre-back, swapping Torino for Slavia Prague in January for a Czech league record €4m and heading his first-ever international goal in a 2-1 friendly win in Norway two months later.

Piotr ZIELINSKI
(Poland)

Euro 2024 could be a breath of fresh air for the influential Poland midfielder after the gloom and controversy of the last few months at Napoli.

Since the news broke in February that Zielinski will leave Naples this summer to join Internazionale on a free transfer, the 29-year-old has found himself in a most delicate situation, accused by supporters of disloyalty, excluded from the club's squad for the knockout phase of the Champions League and also forced to endure a spell on the bench in Serie A, often watching from the touchline as the title holders limped to a mid-table finish. It is a sorry end for a player that only missed one game on the march to the *Scudetto* in 2022-23.

In such difficult times, he has had to look elsewhere for footballing solace and duly found it with the national team who, after a string of sloppy performances in their initial qualifying group, finally got the job done via the play-offs. Like fellow Poland midfielder Nicola Zalewski of Roma, Zielinski has continued to star for the national team while out of favour at club level.



Zielinski insists it's a question of added motivation: "Both Nicola and I have not played so much for our clubs, so we have a lot to prove," he said. "I couldn't wait for the national team get-togethers, where we could show that we were in good physical and mental shape for the challenge. Helping Poland reach the European finals became even more important."

Capped over 80 times for Poland and named the 2023 Polish Player of the Year, Zielinski is the man who makes his country tick. Indeed, only two members of the current squad – Robert Lewandowski and Kamil Grosicki – have won more caps, so he will carry more responsibility this summer than at any of his previous four international tournaments.

Never the most productive of goalscorers, he more than makes up for that with his craft in construction, his versatility – able to operate as a playmaker or in box-to-box mode – competitiveness and work ethic.

EURO 2024 PREDICTIONS

Our experts give their thoughts on this summer's Euros finals...

	JAMIE EVANS	KEIR RADNEDGE	JONATHAN WILSON
I'm excited to see...	**Georgia**. The emotions that come with tournament debuts are what makes international football the purest form of the game. Also, Khvicha Kvaratskhelia is a thrilling winger with the potential to light up the tournament.	**Warren Zaire-Emery**. The young Frenchman has remarkable potential and the Euros finals may show whether he is more than merely another of many bright new kids on the block.	**A tournament in a medium-sized country**. One small enough to get between venues relatively easily, but not small enough to cover a match every day. Watching games in bars is a big part of tournaments.
You might be surprised by...	**Hungary**. Assuming they get through their June friendlies unscathed, the Magyars will go to Germany with the longest unbeaten run in Europe and, unlike Euro 2020, a fully-fit Dominik Szoboszlai. The semi-finals are not unthinkable.	**Hungary**. They've regained status in the international game and this summer's European Championship is the perfect opportunity for them to kick on.	**Austria**, who seem to have gone from strength to strength under Ralf Rangnick. He's not to everybody's taste but every now and again, he gets a job that just seems right for him – and this looks to be one of those.
I'm concerned about...	**Politicians** pretending to like football. Figures from all sides of the politcal spectrum that try to curry favour with fans during major tournaments are as cringeworthy as they are unauthentic.	**Political protests**. It seems almost inevitable that groups from all extremes will seek to use the visibility of this summer's European Championship finals as a stage for their beliefs.	The **24-team format**. Third-placed teams going through is a nonsense as it reduces the jeopardy of the groups and gives sides in Groups E and F an advantage over those in A and B, as they know what results they need.
Keep an eye out for...	**Turkey's young squad**, most notably Kenan Yildiz and Arda Guler. The "Dark Horses" tag proved something of a curse for the Turks at Euro 2020, but if nothing else this current crop should serve up plenty of entertainment.	**Jamal Musiala**. The German is still only 21 years old, but was one of the most self-confident Bayern Munich players in their run to the Champions League semi-finals.	**Injuries**. It feels as though we still haven't quite got back on track since the COVID break, with a residual fatigue affecting everybody. Sadly, that could catch up with a number of players this summer.
The Golden Boot will be won by...	After his record-breaking season with Bayern Munich, it's hard to look beyond **Harry Kane**. Given the dribbling ability of England's wide forwards, he could go close to the Golden Boot with penalties alone.	**Harry Kane**. The most confident European goalscorer at national team level.	**Kylian Mbappe**. I wish he involved himself in games more, but when he gets a chance he is lethal. With his pace and France's general excellence, he should get plenty of chances.
The Player of the Tournament will be...	**Antoine Griezmann**. The World Cup's top assist provider has just enjoyed his highest-scoring season since 2017-18, and this summer may finally get the individual recognition that his France form deserves.	**Kylian Mbappe**. Freed to throw off the shackles of his long Paris Saint-Germain goodbye and start enjoying his football again.	**Florian Wirtz**. In 2002, Michael Ballack came second in the Bundesliga, German Cup, Champions League and World Cup. After shaking off Bayer's tag of "Neverkusen", Wirtz could win three trophies in 2024.
The winners will be...	Assuming they both win their groups, Germany and **France** are on course to meet in the final. In that event, French knowhow and the stardust of Kylian Mbappe would trump the hosts' home advantage.	**England**. Why not now? With Bellingham, Kane, Foden, et al, it is a prospect almost too good to be true.	**Germany**. France and England both have issues in midfield, while the hosts are coming into form at just the right time.

NICK BIDWELL	PETERJON CRESSWELL	TOM KUNDERT	STEPHEN FISHLOCK
Toni Kroos back in the fold for the Germany national team one last time. The control and precision he brings to the midfield will give the hosts a whole new dimension and a much-needed emotional boost.	Spain's **Lamine Yamal** getting his chance on the biggest stage before his 17th birthday and reinvigorating the legacy of Barcelona's legendary *La Masia* academy after its top stars have bowed out.	A **one-country tournament**, with the festive atmosphere generated by the mingling of football fans of multiple nationalities and the mix of colours and cultures.	The players fervently belting out their **national anthems** before kick-off – especially the Italians who are particularly vocal. The passion on display at major tournaments can often leave your hairs standing on end.
Ralf Rangnick's **Austria**, who have only lost one competitive international since the autumn of 2022. *Gegenpressing* experts with a highly experienced head coach, and cohesion and spirit to spare.	Germany's **Robert Andrich**, a late arrival to international football but whose impressive performances for champions Leverkusen have earned him a place next to stellar returnee Toni Kroos in Julian Nagelsmann's midfield.	A group-stage exit for either **Spain** or **Italy**. Being drawn in the "Group of Death" alongside Croatia and Albania could prove costly for one or both of them.	**Czech Republic**. Up to this summer they've never lost under coach Ivan Hasek in his two stints as boss, and have a good Euros pedigree. Patrik Schick, joint-top scorer at Euro 2020, is also fit again after missing all of qualifying.
The number of teams. A tournament with 24 sides is way too many, resulting in a glut of no-hoper entrants. Quality inevitably suffers. More is less in this case.	Violent disturbances by **hooligans** following the disgraceful scenes around Wembley at the Euro 2020 final. German beer, hot sun and an easily accessible tournament could have combustible consequences.	A collective loss of form or an injury crisis in **Portugal's defensive options**, where Roberto Martinez does not have a lot of depth to call upon.	**England finding the right balance in attack** behind Harry Kane. Given the array of glittering, in-form talent at Gareth Southgate's disposal in the number ten and wide roles, he has some crucial decisions to make.
Leadership questions a plenty in the French squad. For all his world-class gifts as a frontrunner, **Kylian Mbappe** is a bad fit for the role of captain – too moody and unimpressive in his body language.	**Giorgio Scalvini**, the 20-year-old centre-back who's had a standout season at Europa League champions Atalanta and should be in Italy's team to face Spain's attacking might in the group stage.	**Bruno Fernandes**. Everybody knows him already, of course, but fans outside of Portugal may not realise just how good he has been for the *Selecao* under Roberto Martinez.	**Cristiano Ronaldo**'s quest to break more Euros records, plus potential breakout stars **Brian Brobbey** (Netherlands), **Maximilian Mittelstadt** (Germany), **Riccardo Calafiori** (Italy), **Joao Neves** (Portugal) and Turkey's **Guler** and **Yildiz**.
Spain's **Alvaro Morata**, a striker who often comes in for a great deal of criticism in his homeland, but who usually delivers at the point of *La Roja's* attack.	**Kylian Mbappe**, still prolific at club level despite another Champions League disappointment and who should be on fire at this tournament following his hat-trick in the 2022 World Cup final.	**Kylian Mbappe**. With Messi and Ronaldo at the tail end of their careers, the stage is set for Mbappe to definitively put down a marker as the greatest footballer in the world today.	**Harry Kane**. But if Italy can progress from Group B, the in-form Gianluca Scamacca could be an interesting outsider. Also, don't rule out Belgium's Romelu Lukaku, who could fill his boots in the group stage alone.
Kevin De Bruyne. After missing the first half of the season through injury, the brilliant Belgium playmaker is now fit and firing again, almost to the point of appearing a player reborn.	**Florian Wirtz**, who has only just turned 21 but showed maturity beyond his years in burying a sniff of a chance when the March friendly with France was only a few seconds old.	**Bruno Fernandes**. Ronaldo may hog the headlines, Bernardo Silva may dominate at club level, but if Portugal attain glory at Euro 2024, Bruno will be the driving force behind it.	This usually depends on who wins the trophy. Wirtz, Musiala, Mbappe, Rodri, Kane, Bukayo Saka and Phil Foden would all be in contention based on my prediction below, but I'll go for **Jude Bellingham**.
England, who have every chance of capturing their first international title in 58 years. While a little porous defensively, their abundance of attacking-third talent should see them through.	**Germany** would have been few people's favourites last autumn, but the return of an in-form Toni Kroos and the blossoming of Florian Wirtz bodes extremely well for the hosts.	With the most explosive player, deepest squad, and extensive experience at the business end of tournament play, it has to be **France**.	Germany are finding form and have home advantage. France have the deepest squad – and, of course, Mbappe. Spain could go all the way too. But perhaps finally it is **England**'s time? They've got as good a chance as any.

Tournament debutants ...Georgia

Austria boss...Ralf Rangnick

Parachuting protester... Euro 2020

Portugal playmaker ...Bruno Fernandes

Pacy and prolific... Kylian Mbappe

Talent... Florian Wirtz

Exciting Englishmen ...Kane, Rice, Bellingham and Foden

World Cup dress rehearsal

The Copa America returns to the United States for the second time, but for the hosts and the participants, the real test will come in 2026

Ecuador was due to host the 2024 Copa America. Under pressure, it pulled out – probably for the best given the country's explosion of drug-related gang violence – giving the United States the opportunity to step in. And so, for the second time, the Copa moves out of South America. Just like 2016, the USA will stage a 16-team tournament, with the ten South Americans joined by six nations from CONCACAF.

A sprawling tournament will take place in 14 stadiums across 13 cities – clearly designed as a test run for the 2026 World Cup, with eight of the giant stadiums also set for use in two years' time. But there is no place for Boston or Philadelphia – two World Cup venues that were employed in the 2016 Copa – while Seattle, another World Cup city, is also out. This is a tournament, then, almost entirely taking place below the Mason-Dixon line – meaning that, although some of the venues are covered with air conditioning, extreme summer heat will be a factor. This is important given the experience of the 1994 World Cup final, when both Brazil and Italy's coaches concluded that the heat had a negative effect on the quality of the spectacle.

The heat will certainly be on the CONCACAF teams. The USA are preparing for what they hope will be a breakout performance in their home World Cup, Mexico are struggling to show that they are not the worst side the country has produced in decades, while the other four (with Canada replacing Haiti) will want to do better than they did in 2016, when they were all eliminated in the group phase, prompting CONCACAF authorities to admit that they were trailing well behind the South Americans.

Back in the States... Chile won the 2016 Copa in New Jersey

Holders...Argentina won the last Copa America in 2021

For the ten footballing nations of South America, the Copa has immense prestige. It is, after all, the world's oldest continental competition, first contested while Europe was tearing itself apart on the Somme. But there is one sense in which the Copa is no longer a direct equivalent of the Euros: no one has specifically built towards this competition, all the more so since there is no South American host desperate to do well in front of their own public. Ever since the continent embarked on its marathon format of World Cup qualification in

1996, the Copa has had to play a secondary role. It fits into the context of the qualifiers. Sometimes this has meant that it has been full of reserve sides. At others, it has kicked off a new cycle of competitive matches. This time it gives a selection of new coaches some much-needed time together with their players.

The interval between the Qatar World Cup and the start of the 2026 qualifiers was shorter for the South American teams than those from any other confederation. When qualifying began last September, only Argentina's World Cup-winning manager Lionel Scaloni had previously led his team in a competitive match, and only Argentina had a team ready. Unsurprisingly, then, after six frenetic rounds of qualifiers late last year, Argentina sit top of the table. The others went into the competition raw – and Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Paraguay have all subsequently made another coaching change. And so, as they prepare for six more frenetic rounds of qualifiers between September and November, all of these coaches will welcome the Copa as an opportunity to spend some time on the training ground with their players.

With so many South American teams (six, plus one intercontinental play-off spot) making it through to an expanded World Cup, no one is out of the race. Both Peru and Paraguay, for example, have managed just a single goal in the six rounds of qualifiers. They will look upon the Copa as a chance to regroup.

For the ten footballing nations of South America, the Copa has immense prestige…but no one has specifically built towards this competition

It certainly worked for Peru in 2016: languishing in the early stages of the Russia 2018 qualifiers, it was in the USA that they formed the group and found the momentum that carried them to their first World Cup since 1982. Similarly, it was during the 2019 Copa that the then-novice Scaloni started to find the right path with Argentina. Two years later, they won the Copa in Brazil. It was Argentina's first senior title since 1993 and, after so many near misses, lifted a terrible weight off the squad. That Copa triumph was a vital step on the way to winning the World Cup in Qatar.

There will be, then, a story of the 2024 Copa America to be written after the final on the evening of July 14. But for the real importance of this tournament, we will have to wait a couple of years to assess the effect it has had on the World Cup of 2026.

STADIUMS

MetLife Stadium
East Rutherford, New Jersey (82,566)

AT&T Stadium
Arlington, Texas (80,000)

Arrowhead Stadium
Kansas City, Missouri (76,416)

Bank of America Stadium
Charlotte, North Carolina (74,867)

NRG Stadium
Houston, Texas (72,220)

Mercedes-Benz Stadium
Atlanta, Georgia (71,000)

SoFi Stadium
Inglewood, California (70,240)

Levi's Stadium
Santa Clara, California (68,500)

Hard Rock Stadium
Miami Gardens, Florida (64,767)

State Farm Stadium
Glendale, Arizona (63,400)

Allegiant Stadium
Las Vegas, Nevada (61,000)

Inter&Co Stadium
Orlando, Florida (25,500)

Q2 Stadium
Austin, Texas (20,738)

Children's Mercy Park
Kansas City, Kansas (18,467)

SCHEDULE

GROUP A

Jun 20	**Argentina v Canada**	Mercedes-Benz Stadium
Jun 21	**Peru v Chile**	AT&T Stadium
Jun 25	**Peru v Canada**	Children's Mercy Park
Jun 25	**Chile v Argentina**	MetLife Stadium
Jun 29	**Argentina v Peru**	Hard Rock Stadium
Jun 29	**Canada v Chile**	Inter&Co Stadium

GROUP B

Jun 22	**Ecuador v Venezuela**	Levi's Stadium
Jun 22	**Mexico v Jamaica**	NRG Stadium
Jun 26	**Ecuador v Jamaica**	Allegiant Stadium
Jun 26	**Venezuela v Mexico**	SoFi Stadium
Jun 30	**Mexico v Ecuador**	State Farm Stadium
Jun 30	**Jamaica v Venezuela**	Q2 Stadium

GROUP C

Jun 23	**United States v Bolivia**	AT&T Stadium
Jun 23	**Uruguay v Panama**	Hard Rock Stadium
Jun 27	**Panama v United States**	Mercedes-Benz Stadium
Jun 27	**Uruguay v Bolivia**	MetLife Stadium
Jul 1	**United States v Uruguay**	Arrowhead Stadium
Jul 1	**Bolivia v Panama**	Inter&Co Stadium

GROUP D

Jun 24	**Colombia v Paraguay**	NRG Stadium
Jun 24	**Brazil v Costa Rica**	SoFi Stadium
Jun 28	**Colombia v Costa Rica**	State Farm Stadium
Jun 28	**Paraguay v Brazil**	Allegiant Stadium
Jul 2	**Brazil v Colombia**	Levi's Stadium
Jul 2	**Costa Rica v Paraguay**	Q2 Stadium

QUARTER-FINALS

(1)	Jul 4	**Winner A v Runner-up B**	NRG Stadium
(2)	Jul 5	**Winner B v Runner-up A**	AT&T Stadium
(3)	Jul 6	**Winner C v Runner-up D**	Allegiant Stadium
(4)	Jul 6	**Winner D v Runner-up C**	State Farm Stadium

SEMI-FINALS

Jul 9	**Winner Match 1 v Winner Match 2**	MetLife Stadium
Jul 10	**Winner Match 3 v Winner Match 4**	Bank of America Stadium

THIRD PLACE PLAY-OFF

Jul 13 Bank of America Stadium

FINAL

Jul 14 Hard Rock Stadium

6 of the best Ones to watch in the USA

Tim Vickery picks out the stars who could light up this summer's Copa America

1 RODRYGO
BRAZIL

Given his senior Brazil debut at the tender age of 18, Rodrygo has been a great Brazilian hope for many years. So far in the national team, though, he has not quite taken on the burden of responsibility – the missed penalty in the 2022 World Cup quarter-final shootout against Croatia perhaps gave a hint that maybe it had all come too soon.

But his time could be now. The squad is packed full of wingers, but if deep opposing defences are able to nullify their pace then patience and guile will be needed. Rodrygo could be the man to supply it.

Such a gifted all-round footballer, with a clear capacity to think under pressure, it might be up to him to link the attack together. Capable of operating all across the frontline, or just behind it, Rodrygo could use this Copa America to announce himself as Brazil's number ten.

2 Dario OSORIO
CHILE

It has been a long, hard wait for Chile to produce youngsters up to the task of replacing the golden generation of the Copa triumphs in 2015 and 2016. There have been a few false dawns, but maybe things will be different with rising talent Osorio.

This will surprise those who followed the South American Under-20 Championship at the start of last year, where Osorio was almost a parody of ineffective adolescent petulance. But a fine debut season in Midtjylland in Denmark appears to have matured the 20-year-old.

A lanky, leggy, left-footed winger who likes to cut in from the right, Osorio was a revelation in the March friendlies, impressive against Albania and even better away to France, where he set up several moments of danger and scored his first international goal with a crisply-struck shot from outside the penalty area.

3 Kendry PAEZ
ECUADOR

Great excitement surrounds the first senior tournament of a talent so special that he was scoring and setting up goals in World Cup qualification aged just 16.

The latest – and potentially greatest – Independiente del Valle prodigy, Paez will join Chelsea next summer. Unlike the vast majority at his age, he will make the move not as a mere promise, but as an established international accustomed to taking on responsibility – and this tournament should be a fascinating part of his education.

A versatile, left-footed attacking midfielder, he stands out not only for his individual talent, but also for his fluid capacity to combine at pace with his team-mates.

4 James RODRIGUEZ
COLOMBIA

A decade on from his World Cup breakthrough in Brazil, the riddle of James grows ever more complex.

He appears to have gone on a global tour of frustration, taking in ten countries, with flashes of greatness interspersed with injury issues and doubts about his attitude.

Perhaps he has always missed half-a-yard of pace to consistently stand out at the very highest level, but he remains an extremely talented footballer, combining a wonderful left foot with the vision to find a pass.

After the disaster of the Qatar qualifiers, current boss Nestor Lorenzo may have found a way to get the best from his number ten. Recent Colombia displays have been magisterial, with Rodriguez serving as an effective deep supply line for the pace of Luis Diaz.

5 Federico VALVERDE
URUGUAY

Amid all the stars in the Real Madrid firmament, it can be easy to overlook the contribution of Valverde.

But it is no longer so easy with Uruguay. The generational change with the Sky Blues has left Valverde, in his own quiet way, as the leader of Marcelo Bielsa's pack. From midfield, he sets the dynamic tone with his extraordinary lungpower and solid footballing sense. In possession, he can switch play out wide or threaten the goal with his howitzer right foot. In defence, he can run backwards, if needed, with the same enthusiasm as his surges in the other direction.

A product of Uruguay's excellent youth development work who moved to Europe at the age of 18, the time has arrived for him to be the leading figure in the national team.

6 Salomon RONDON
VENEZUELA

Venezuela went into the Qatar qualifiers full of hope, but everything went wrong, especially losing their most important player for two thirds of the campaign. Rondon was based in China and then England, and COVID restrictions stopped him coming back. Yet, despite featuring in only six of the 18 qualifiers, he was still Venezuela's top scorer.

He pins back defenders, gives the team's dangerous wingers an imposing target and provides a constant goal threat. But is he in decline?

Rondon has been a hit for Mexican side Pachuca. But the evidence of his spell with River Plate is that, nearing 35, time might be catching up with him. The Copa is his chance to prove otherwise.

GROUP A

ARGENTINA (15 Copa wins, last in 2021)

Might Argentina be about to discover that if getting there is hard, staying there is even harder? Lionel Scaloni's team are reigning Copa and world champions and lead the field a third of the way through the qualifiers for the 2026 World Cup.

A sense of renewal is in the air. This tournament marks the end of the international career of Angel Di Maria, scorer of the goal that won the last Copa and hero of so many big matches, while there is also the ongoing question of how long Lionel Messi will be around. Admittedly not fully fit, he was ineffective in November's historic victory away to Brazil – and the prospect of building a team without him may well have prompted Scaloni's post-match musings, since recanted, on stepping down. A replacement must surely be found for Nicolas Otamendi at some point soon, too.

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Julian ALVAREZ
Broke in during the World Cup as Messi's strike partner, but can also operate behind the striker as (whisper it) Messi's long-term replacement.

▼ THE COACH

Lionel SCALONI
A cheap stop-gap after Russia 2018 who ended up carrying the team to glory. An amazing story – maybe with more chapters yet to come?

PERU (2 Copa wins, last in 1975)

Ricardo Gareca was always going to be a hard act to follow. The Argentine coach managed to get the Peruvian whole to add up to more than the sum of its parts, which proved well beyond his replacement, Juan Reynoso. The one-time national team captain led the side to bottom of the 2026 World Cup qualifying table with no wins and just a single goal in six games.

Reynoso gave way this year to Uruguay's Jorge Fossati, who had just won the league title with Universitario. There is little to go on, besides gentle friendlies in March against opposition from Central America, but Fossati clearly plans to go with his trademark 3-5-2 system. He will be hoping for a repeat of the 2016 Copa in the USA, where Gareca's Peru found the blend that carried them to the next World Cup.

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Piero QUISPE
Little, skipping pass-and-move midfielder making a sound start in Mexico at Pumas UNAM after helping Universitario to the title.

▼ THE COACH

Jorge FOSSATI
Experienced coach who has worked extensively around South America and the Middle East. Narrowly failed to take his native Uruguay to Germany 2006.

CHILE (2 Copa wins, last in 2016)

The 2016 Copa in the USA is the greatest moment in Chile's footballing history. Since then, there has been little to celebrate, missing out on two World Cups amid a perennial wait to replace the golden generation.

Ex-Marcelo Bielsa assistant Eduardo Berizzo was an attempt to revive the spark of the era of Bielsa and Jorge Sampaoli, but it proved a failure. He resigned with Chile recording a single win in six rounds of World Cup qualifying.

In has come Ricardo Gareca who right from the start has taken the heat out of the "renovation" debate, with some of the old guard restored and others left out. In his trademark 4-2-3-1, the team performed well in the March friendlies, beating Albania 3-0 and only going down 3-2 away to European giants France.

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Claudio BRAVO
Recalled in March, the veteran keeper is a survivor of the 2004 Copa. Nearing 150 caps and still seen as an important leader.

▼ THE COACH

Ricardo GARECA
Ex-Argentina striker who did a magnificent job guiding Peru to Russia 2018. Brought in this year in the hope of achieveing something similar.

CANADA (0 Copa wins)

Any conversation about Canada will likely reference co-hosting the 2026 World Cup, and the team are once again treading new ground in preparation.

Qualifying for the Qatar World Cup was historic – and achieved in convincing fashion – but ultimately ended in a trio of defeats to Belgium, Croatia and Morocco. Reaching a first Copa America was less straightforward, as they were beaten on away goals by Jamaica in the CONCACAF Nations League quarter-finals, while patience was required to overcome Trinidad & Tobago.

The likes of goalkeeper Milan Borjan (36) and defender Steven Vitoria (37) were left out for that last match, ushering in a new wave that Jesse Marsch now takes over to give the players and their new coach key major tournament experience before 2026.

Danny Lewis

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Jacob SHAFFELBURG
Scored twice against Messi's Inter Miami in the CONCACAF Champions Cup and struck late v Trinidad & Tobago.

▼ THE COACH

Jesse MARSCH
There were 259 days between John Herdman's departure and Jesse Marsch's appointment, but Canada now have their man.

GROUP B

MEXICO (0 Copa wins)

Expectations are low for an *El Tri* side that has struggled to replace the golden generation of Carlos Vela, Chicharito and co. Their squad for this tournament is a look to the future, with the likes of Guillermo Ochoa, Hirving Lozano and Raul Jimenez left out and several youngsters drafted in.

The selection presents an opportunity for players to step up. The country's most exciting talent, striker Santiago Gimenez, is yet to establish himself as an undisputed starter despite a great season at Feyenoord, while Edson Alvarez has found it difficult to replicate his West Ham form for Mexico.

In their favour, *El Tri* will have the unrestricted support of their huge fanbase in the USA – even if they are still smarting from defeats against their arch-rivals in both of the last two CONCACAF Nations League campaigns.

Martin del Palacio Langer

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Edson ALVAREZ
Mexico's most high-profile player. Takes on more attacking responsibility than at his club, which can sometimes weigh him down.

▼ THE COACH

Jaime LOZANO
Led the U23s to bronze at Tokyo 2020. Won the 2023 Gold Cup, but isn't universally popular and a poor performance here could cost him his position.

ECUADOR (0 Copa wins)

Going into the 2026 World Cup qualifiers, Ecuador were handed a three-point penalty for problems with a player's documents in the previous campaign. This has been quickly shrugged off, with three wins and two draws in the six rounds.

Coach Felix Sanchez can play with a back four but prefers three at the back, taking advantage of an excellent crop of young centre-backs. Indeed, with Independiente del Valle in the forefront, youth development is a big plus, but it can be uneven. The goalkeeping situation has not been entirely resolved, and centre-forward is a problem position with the team too dependent for goals on Enner Valencia, now reaching veteran status and surely over-played during 2022 and 2023.

Just five goals in six qualifiers is a slight concern for the team.

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Willian PACHO
Left-footed Eintracht Frankfurt defender, yet another Independiente del Valle product, whose passing from the back helps set moves in motion.

▼ THE COACH

Felix SANCHEZ
Spanish-born, one-time Barcelona youth coach whose time with Qatar ended in World Cup disappointment after showing plenty of earlier promise.

VENEZUELA (0 Copa wins)

Coming away from Brazil last October with a shock 1-1 draw has fuelled optimism in Venezuela that they really are going to make their World Cup debut in 2026 – and astonishingly, with a third of the campaign played, they are ahead of the Brazilians in the table.

Argentine coach Fernando Batista has concentrated on making sure his team is always competitive, and will be delighted that they have conceded just three goals in the six matchdays. But in a Copa where only the top two teams advance from the group, do they have the quality to win games under tournament conditions and make it to the knockout stages? It will be interesting to see, but Venezuela will value the experience and group formation en route to 2026.

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Kervin ANDRADE
Stocky teenage attacking midfielder picked up last year by Brazilian club Fortaleza, and starting to make an impact.

▼ THE COACH

Fernando BATISTA
Brother of 1986 World Cup winner Sergio. Took his native Argentina to Tokyo 2020, before joining the Venezuela staff. Took the top job in March 2023.

JAMAICA (0 Copa wins)

A team with so much talent and potential, but questions remain as to whether they can fulfil it. Recent squads have included numerous Premier League stars and English dual-nationals, but they can struggle to maintain a consistent team unit.

Former Iceland head coach Heimir Hallgrimsson was called in to attempt to instil some structure and, under his stewardship, the Reggae Boyz reached the semi-finals of both the CONCACAF Gold Cup and Nations League, which secured their invite to this Copa America.

The biggest concern is the availability of Leon Bailey, arguably the best player in the CONCACAF region, after the Aston Villa winger criticised the Jamaican federation for a lack of professionalism. Can Jamaica's unpredictability work in their favour?

James Nalton

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Omari HUTCHINSON
The 20-year-old winger helped Ipswich earn promotion to the Premier League while on loan from Chelsea.

▼ THE COACH

Heimir HALLGRIMSSON
The mastermind of Iceland's stunning defeat of England at Euro 2016 is now trying to instil the same spirit in Jamaica.

GROUP C

URUGUAY (15 Copa wins, last in 2011)

It is easy to see why Marcelo Bielsa was attracted to the Uruguay job. Quite apart from any affinity with the country, there are similarities with the Chile side he took charge of in 2007 – a young, malleable group of excellent players to mould.

After Qatar, Uruguay were inevitably going to go through a generational change, and a new spine – Ronald Araujo, Federico Valverde, Darwin Nunez – has emerged. In the third round of qualifiers, a late Nunez penalty brought a draw in Colombia, and Uruguay were flying. Next, they beat and outplayed Brazil, then won away to Argentina, and are by some distance the top scorers in qualification.

Bielsa is now delighted to have some time with his players this summer; his only regret so far is failing to qualify the Under-23s for the Paris Olympics.

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Maxi ARAUJO
Bielsa brought this Mexican-based left-footed winger straight into his squad. Scored a memorable goal v Argentina.

▼ THE COACH

Marcelo BIELSA
Legendary Argentine now in charge of his third national team. Has a non-negotiable commitment to high energy, attacking football.

BOLIVIA (1 Copa win, in 1963)

Based on some good results in friendlies, Bolivia went into the 2026 qualifiers full of confidence, happily assuming that they would pick up enough wins at the extreme altitude of La Paz to carry them to their first World Cup since 1994, when they boasted a fine generation that they have never been able to replace.

Instead, they were a disaster, and Argentine coach Gustavo Costas was sacked after losing each of the first four qualifiers.

His replacement, Brazilian Antonio Carlos Zago, beat Peru in his first match using a back four system, though he has since used the more typical back three. There have not been many changes in personnel, though Zago must do without all-time top scorer Marcelo Martins Moreno, who has retired.

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

ROBSON MATHEUS
Left-footed central midfielder of Brazilian descent enjoying good form for Always Ready. The 22-year-old made his debut in March.

▼ THE COACH

Antonio Carlos ZAGO
Former Brazil centre-back, who stepped in after the opening four rounds of qualifiers. Won the Bolivian league title with Bolivar in 2022.

USA (0 Copa wins)

Fresh from their CONCACAF Nations League win in March, this Copa will be seen as a real test of where this team are ahead of co-hosting the World Cup in 2026. They enter the tournament as its third-best team, according to the FIFA rankings, with only Brazil and Argentina ahead of them. Expectations will reflect this, especially as hosts, and USMNT fans will be looking forward to a performance that takes them deep into the knockout stages.

Performing well in a group that also contains Uruguay will be vital, as the Group C runners-up could face an early meeting with Brazil in the quarter-finals.

This is the beginning of a big couple of years for US Soccer on home soil, and a respectable performance is the absolute minimum requirement.

James Nalton

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Giovanni REYNA
Back in favour and form, scoring in the Nations League final against Mexico before being named the tournament's best player.

▼ THE COACH

Gregg BERHALTER
Re-appointed as USMNT boss by former Southampton director of football Matt Crocker. Big responsibility in a big moment.

PANAMA (0 Copa wins)

The 2023 CONCACAF Gold Cup runners-up are coming into this tournament on a relative high as Central America's strongest side. They finished top of their group in the Nations League, going on to dismantle Costa Rica 6-1 on aggregate in the quarter-finals before losing 3-0 to Mexico in the semi-finals and 1-0 to Jamaica in the third place play-off.

They have proven in the past year or so that they can mix it with higher-ranked teams. In the most recent FIFA rankings, they moved ahead of Canada to become the third-best team in CONCACAF, and it is a promotion that doesn't flatter them. They defeated the United States on penalties to reach the 2023 Gold Cup final, so will not be fazed when facing the same opponents in the group stage here.

James Nalton

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Adalberto CARRASQUILLA
Midfield maestro who sets the tone for his team with his displays. Plays for MLS outfit Houston Dynamo.

▼ THE COACH

Thomas CHRISTIANSEN
Born in Denmark but schooled at Barca as a player, winning two Spain caps. This is the ex-Leeds boss' first international job.

GROUP D

BRAZIL (9 Copa wins, last in 2019)

2023 was a nightmare year for Brazil, who took the decision to wait (in vain, as it turned out) for Carlo Ancelotti. The temporary solution was Fernando Diniz, an unorthodox coach whose methods require time on the training ground. This exercise in hubris was a predictable failure. After three consecutive defeats, Brazil lie sixth in the 2026 qualification table, and in any previous World Cup, with fewer qualifying spots available, would be in real danger of missing out.

Morale has been boosted by the opening two games in the reign of Dorival Junior: a win away to England and a draw with Spain. These, though, were untypical, as Brazil were able to sit deep and counter-attack with pace. From now on, their main challenge will be playing their way through more cautious opponents.

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

VINICIUS JUNIOR
Forced his way into the Brazil XI shortly before Qatar. Then, he was a bolt-on, but now he is the team's most important forward.

▼ THE COACH

DORIVAL JUNIOR
Low-profile figure underestimated for much of his lengthy career, which both as player and coach is limited to Brazil. Tactically flexible.

COLOMBIA (1 Copa win, in 2001)

Colombia's failure to make it to Qatar – amid an extraordinary run of seven games without a goal – was a surprise and a disappointment, which seems very unlikely to be repeated in 2026. Goals are still something of a problem – just six in the six WC qualifiers played so far – and a top-class successor to Radamel Falcao would be most welcome.

Not only is the team unbeaten on the road to 2026, but they have not suffered a reverse since Nestor Lorenzo took over in 2022 – that's 18 games and counting, plus the previous three matches.

This tournament, then, is an important moment in Colombia's recuperation, and the team should be able to count on enthusiastic support from their many US-based supporters. The match against Brazil in Santa Clara, California should be intense.

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Jhon ARIAS
Stocky little soul and motor of continental champions Fluminense, establishing himself in the national team as a winger or in a more central role.

▼ THE COACH

Nestor LORENZO
Former assistant to Jose Pekerman who has done remarkably well since going solo, first with Peruvian club Melgar and now with Colombia.

PARAGUAY (2 Copa wins, last in 1979)

Paraguay approached the 2026 WC qualifiers confident that the Premier League duo of Julio Enciso and Miguel Almiron would help provide the goals that have been so lacking ever since the team reached the quarter-finals of the 2010 World Cup. But Enciso missed all six rounds with injury, Almiron was out for two, and Paraguay have so far managed just one goal.

As a result, Guillermo Barros Schelotto was sacked after two rounds and replaced by fellow Argentine Daniel Garnero, who has made little impact so far.

Paraguay were the only South American team not to play in March after their meeting with Russia was called off. The Copa, then, is Garnero's chance to regroup. The key question: does he have enough genuine quality at his disposal to improve the team's fortunes?

Tim Vickery

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Ramon SOSA
A late developer, the 24-year-old winger from Argentine outfit Talleres has been the sharpest instrument of Paraguay's blunt attack.

▼ THE COACH

Daniel GARNERO
Brought in last year as a consequence of his consistent success in the Paraguayan league, winning eight titles at three different clubs.

COSTA RICA (0 Copa wins)

The memorable and historic performance at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, where Costa Rica reached the quarter-finals, is now a distant memory. Of that iconic team – and following Keylor Navas' shock retirement – only forward Joel Campbell will play in the Copa America, and his team-mates are light years away from those who played in that heroic side.

Easily defeated by Panama in the CONCACAF Nations League, *Los Ticos* punched their ticket to the Copa after defeating another Central American giant in decline, Honduras, 3-1, but the victory doesn't mask the problems of a team that lacks top-tier talent.

Given the side's outlook, it would be a surprise if they even managed to get a win in what is probably the most difficult group in the competition.

Martin del Palacio Langer

▼ ONE TO WATCH

Manfred UGALDE
Returned in autumn 2023, scoring v Saudi Arabia, after two years out of the national team. They missed the forward's speed and dribbling.

▼ THE COACH

Gustavo ALFARO
Argentine coach with a good resume in South America. Impressed in charge of Ecuador at Qatar 2022, but has struggled so far with Costa Rica.

2024 COPA AMERICA PREDICTIONS

Our experts give their thoughts on this summer's Copa finals...

	TIM VICKERY	JAMES NALTON	MARTIN DEL PALACIO LANGER
I'm excited to see...	**The fallout** from the finals and the effect it will have on World Cup qualification when the action resumes in September. Will there have been coaching changes? Will some teams have bonded over the summer?	What **Julian Quinones** can bring to Mexico. The Colombia-born forward has been one of the stars of Liga MX and declared for the Mexico national team last year.	Whether **Argentina** can keep the momentum going after their World Cup victory. They spent 23 years without winning anything – can they now win their third major tournament in a row?
You might be surprised by...	How **South American teams** view their own competition. Results in this year's Copa are more important for the CONCACAF sides, with the USA preparing for 2026 and the others looking to improve on their 2016 Copa showings.	**Jamaica**. If they can get their big-name players to join up with the squad, and coach Heimir Hallgrimsson can get them to click, they could spring a major surprise in Group B.	Marcelo Bielsa's **Uruguay**. The only team to have beaten Argentina in the 2026 World Cup qualifiers, *La Celeste* have been rejuvenated by the legendary coach and can spring a surprise.
I'm concerned about...	The intense **summer heat** of many of the venues, especially as some of the elite players are due to go through this in three consecutive years, with 2026 and next year's Club World Cup.	**Canada**. Under new management, they need a good showing in their biggest test since the 2022 World Cup where they failed to pick up a point in their group. It won't be easy, though.	**Mexico**. The FA "convinced" coach Jaime Lozano that a major overhaul was needed and he left some of his most important players – such as goalkeeper Guillermo Ochoa and winger Hirving Lozano – out of the squad.
Keep an eye out for...	**Ecuador's crop of young centre-backs**: Piero Hincapie (Leverkusen), Willian Pacho (Eintracht Frankfurt) and Joel Ordonez (Club Brugge), all of whom are Independiente del Valle graduates and coming off the back of good seasons.	**Giovanni Reyna**, who can set the narrative for the United States just as much as skipper Christian Pulisic. Still only 21, he's now more settled with Gregg Berhalter's USMNT and is a trusted starter.	**USA**. They have been touting their golden generation for a few years now and it's time for them to produce, with many of their players starting to reach the peak of their careers.
The Golden Boot will be won by...	Uruguay are comfortably the top scorers in 2026 CONMEBOL World Cup qualification and their group looks one of the easiest, so how about **Darwin Nunez**?	Brazil have a wealth of attacking talent. 17-year-old **Endrick** already looks like he'll score plenty for Brazil, but if **Richarlison** is chosen and is fit to lead the line, he'll also be up there.	**Julian Alvarez**. Argentina have a cakewalk group and a pretty straightforward path to the final, so the Manchester City striker should get plenty of opportunities against the likes of Peru and Canada.
The Player of the Tournament will be...	Wouldn't it be great if it could be **Angel Di Maria**, so underrated for so long, tearing it up on his international farewell?	**Lionel Messi**. He now calls the United States home and will attract support for Argentina wherever he goes, as has happened in MLS with his club side Inter Miami.	I'm tempted to say Vinicius Junior, as on paper he is surely the tournament's standout player, but **Lionel Messi**'s star power is too much to resist – especially if Argentina continue their good record against Brazil.
The winners will be...	**Tired**! If Argentina cannot hold on to their crown, and Brazil don't resurge to take it off them, then the dark horses are Colombia or Uruguay, with special mention for the USA, for whom this is an especially important tournament.	With the final being played in Miami, it's all set up for another **Argentina** and Messi triumph. It might even convince him to play on until the 2026 World Cup.	**Argentina**. Brazil should be back to a decent level, but the form of *La Albiceleste* will be too much to handle. I expect this to be the swan-song of a generation that restored the pride of the Argentinian fans.

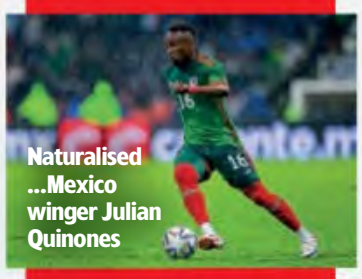
STEVE MENARY

CARL WORSWICK

JOEL RICHARDS

DANNY LEWIS

A **Caribbean team** back in the Copa America after an eight-year absence. Haiti and Jamaica both competed at the 2016 tournament, but failed to get a point between them.


Naturalised ...Mexico winger Julian Quinones

Marcelo Bielsa's **Uruguay**, who are averaging over two goals a game in the South American qualifiers and put both Brazil and Argentina to the sword in 2023.

What **Kendry Paez**, Ecuador's teen sensation, can produce in this competition. Already signed by Chelsea, the 17-year-old has showcased his raw talent and ability in the Copa Libertadores.

How **Group B** plays out between Ecuador, Venezuela, Jamaica and Mexico. Anybody could get a result against anybody and there could be a sprinkling of carnage.

Jamaica. Heimir Hallgrimsson's men have a kind draw and a chance of results against Ecuador, Venezuela and Mexico that could take them into the knockout stages on their third appearance.

Ones to watch... Jamaica

Jamaica, who have failed to win a game or even score a goal in their two previous Copa America appearances, but should challenge to get out of their group this time after reaching the semis at last year's Gold Cup.

Uruguay. Darwin Nunez is top scorer in South American World Cup qualifying, coach Marcelo Bielsa is bringing through exciting young players, and *La Celeste* have 15 Copa America titles for motivation and inspiration.

The **CONCACAF nations**. It will likely be the usual CONMEBOL big-hitters in the latter stages, but the incoming teams can certainly make an impact.

Costa Rica, whose tough draw was made even harder by the decision of their only top-class player and long-serving captain, goalkeeper Keylor Navas, to retire from international football on the eve of the tournament.

Retired... Keylor Navas

What the **new expanded tournament means for the future** of the competition. Will a regular 16-team Copa leave only a hegemony of big nations, namely the US, as the only host countries in the future?

How **the inflated format**, combining CONMEBOL and CONCACAF teams, will translate into quality and entertaining football – especially in the group phase.

Chile. Some of the squad that knocked Spain out of the 2014 World Cup remains, but they could face a disappointing major tournament exit of their own a decade later.

Leon Bailey – if he makes his nation's squad. A key player for an Aston Villa side that surpassed expectations in this year's Premier League, and Jamaica's talisman.

Golden talent... Giovanni Reyna

Colombia, who are on an 18-game unbeaten run under coach Nestor Lorenzo, the former Swindon Town defender, after taking charge of *Los Cafeteros* following their failure to qualify for the last World Cup.

The **pink card**, which will be introduced in this tournament in the event of a player sustaining a head injury or concussion, and will allow teams to make an additional substitution.

Canada under Jesse Marsch. The ex-Leeds United boss was only appointed on May 13, so won't have had much time with his squad, but will need to hit the ground running.

Lionel Messi. He only needed four goals to be joint-top scorer in Argentina's Copa America victory in 2021, and can surely emulate both feats again as a last hurrah.

Deadly duo... Endrick and Vinicius Junior

Darwin Nunez. The current top scorer in the South American World Cup qualifiers with five goals, Uruguay should hit the ground running after being drawn alongside Panama and Bolivia in Group C.

Argentina's **Lautaro Martinez**. Top scorer in Serie A with Inter this season, *El Toro* is not short of confidence – he says he stands alongside Kylian Mbappe and Erling Haaland as the world's top striker.

Jonathan David. Canada's Group A opponents Peru and Chile have two of the worst defensive records in CONMEBOL World Cup qualifying campaign – only Bolivia have conceded more – and he can take advantage.

Messi, again. In his new adopted homeland and in what could be his last major finals, the script writes itself.

Still got it...Leo Messi

Lionel Messi, if his creaking body can last the course in this, his seventh Copa. Five goals and he'll also leapfrog Norberto Mendez (Argentina) and Zizinho (Brazil) as the tournament's all-time top goalscorer – both on 17.

Lionel Messi, who at 36 years of age is still the player Argentina revolve play around. The captain could well deliver the key moments of creativity to guide *La Albiceleste* to another Copa success.

Vinicius Junior, as he continues to tear opposition defences apart, leaving the competition with a hatful of goals and assists plus the trophy.

Brazil. No Neymar will weaken the *Selecao* on the big stage, but they are the only side likely to offer a challenge to Argentina.

Holders... Argentina

World champions **Argentina**, who remain the team to beat. Uruguay and Colombia aren't too far behind them, but if Messi can keep himself fit then Argentina should make it a record 16th Copa title.

Argentina, who are firm favourites to build on the formidable bedrock of the 2022 World Cup win and the table-topping form in the current World Cup qualifiers to secure consecutive Copa America crowns.

Brazil. Having scored twice in an encouraging first two friendlies for Dorival Junior, Endrick will score an important goal for the dream start to a new era.

El Flaco

Tim Vickery reflects on the life and career of Cesar Luis Menotti, Argentina's first World Cup-winning coach

There is a Cesar Luis Menotti phrase so good that it should be emblazoned on every dressing room around the world. "To be a footballer," he said, "is to be a privileged interpreter of the dreams of many people."

It is a vintage example of Menotti, an icon of Argentine and global football, who died on May 5 at the age of 85. The phrase is a lyrically constructed defence of the values that Menotti saw in the sport, and which he constantly saw as coming under attack from nefarious forces. The lanky coach (he was "*el flaco*" – the thin man) brooded on the essence of the game while he puffed away on yet another cigarette. "Our football," he once wrote, "belongs to the working class, and possesses the amplitude, nobility and generosity to allow everyone to enjoy it as a spectacle." One of his former players with a similar taste for philosophising, Jorge Valdano, described Menotti as "*Don Quixote de la cancha*" (in Argentine Spanish "*cancha*" is the pitch). But there is a key difference. The hero of the Cervantes novel was a ridiculous figure in the grip of a romantic delusion. Menotti, in contrast, was entirely grounded and capable of pragmatism. He did not only conquer his Dulcinea – he also took her home, in the form of the trophy for winning the 1978 World Cup.

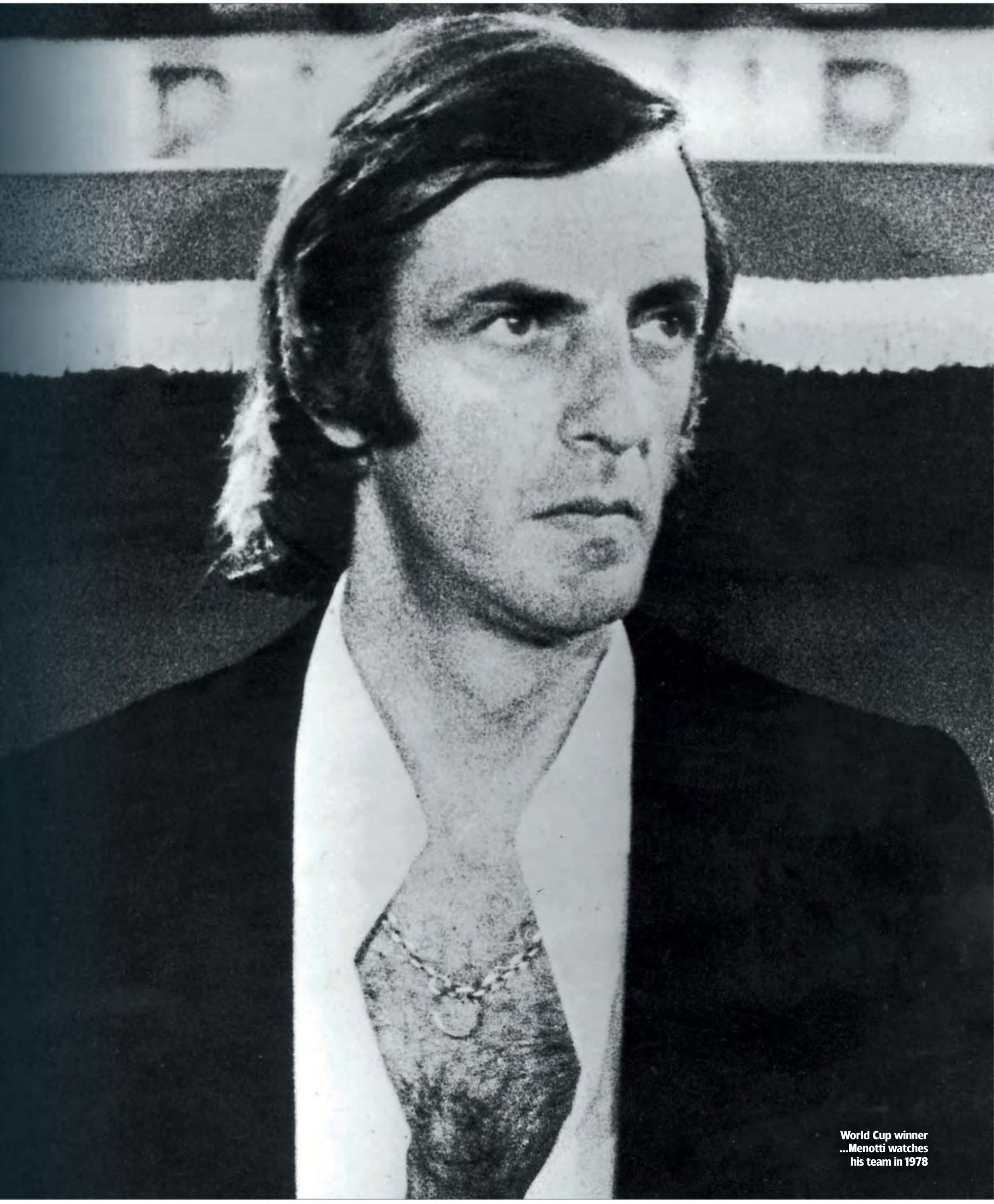
This is where Menotti is most important. If Lionel Messi is a world champion today, then he owes at least part of his title to Menotti, a fellow son of Rosario. After all, in order for Argentina to win the tournament for the third time, they had to win it for the first. And that looked a long way off when a young Cesar Luis Menotti took charge of the national team in 1974.

Two thumping defeats are crucial to the context. The first was in 1958. The previous decade had been the golden age of Argentine football. Had there been World Cups in the 1940s, they would have been the favourites. They were top dogs in South America and considered themselves a major power. But, after sitting out the tournaments of 1950 and 1954, they received a brutal shock on their return in Sweden. Football had moved on, and they were brushed aside 6-1 by Czechoslovakia.

It was a cruel blow, and Argentine football responded by turning away from its free-flowing tradition and taking refuge in ultra-defensive dark arts. Menotti despised all of this. He played through the 1960s as a languid striker, even spending a year in Brazil with Santos (he was one of the few Argentines to rate his ex-team-mate Pele as better than Maradona).

Going into the 1970s as a coach, he was keen to build a side that was the antithesis of the snarling cynicism that had become the norm. His Huracan side that won the championship in 1973 is one of those teams that stick in the collective memory for the swaggering beauty of their play. It remains the club's only league title of the professional era, and it catapulted the 35-year-old to take charge of a national team still smarting from another World Cup humiliation – the second defeat in the story.

In 1974, Johan Cruyff's Netherlands team rendered South American football obsolete, defeating Uruguay, Argentina and Brazil. Argentina were thrashed 4-0. It was 1958 all over again,



World Cup winner ...Menotti watches his team in 1978

and the Europeans seemed like supermen. How to compete? For Argentina, this was especially urgent: they were hosting the next World Cup.

Uruguay faded from the scene. Brazil first tried to copy the Dutch model, then started to conclude that the physical evolution of the game ruled out old-style attempts at passing football, instead opting to bulk up and counter-attack. Menotti's response was totally different. Traditional, free-flowing Argentine football could still prevail, he argued. But they had to up the rhythm, be faster and fitter. Menotti the coach would not have selected Menotti the player. He drilled his players remorselessly.

The key man in his team was Osvaldo Ardiles. By no means the popular choice for the central midfield role, Ardiles himself would have favoured River Plate's JJ Lopez instead of him. Lopez was classy. But Ardiles brought dynamism, linking the sectors with his high-tempo fetch-and-carry game.

There was another sense in which Ardiles was a symbol of the Menotti project. The little midfielder was also not from Buenos Aires. Football in Argentina was very centralised around the capital city, and Menotti had long believed that players from the provinces were not being given a fair chance. He created special mechanisms to ease provincial players into the set-up. He transformed Argentina into a genuinely national side, while crafting a method of play that brought the team into the modern era – and he was rewarded with a 3-1 win over the Netherlands in the 1978 final, including a match-winning performance from Mario Kempes, the swashbuckling support striker Menotti had brought back from Europe.

> Ever since the 1978 World Cup, Argentina have had a place at football's top table – and that had not been the case for a few decades before Menotti worked his magic

It remains a highly controversial World Cup, with organisational problems and suspicions of off-the-field manipulation. Whatever the truth, one thing is clear: ever since the 1978 World Cup, Argentina have had a place at football's top table – and that had not been the case for a few decades before Menotti worked his magic.

The following years were dominated by the ideological split between Menotti and his successor as Argentina coach, Carlos Bilardo. A member of the notorious Estudiantes team of the late 1960s that Menotti looked down upon, Bilardo was a win-at-all-costs merchant. There was an obvious clash of principles. But amid all the noise, there was also some continuity. Menotti's method of defending – squeezing up to deny space to the opposition – was also part of the Bilardo mix, and helped Argentina to World Cup win number two in 1986.

By that point, Menotti was 47 – and his last title was already three years behind him. He won the sophomore Under-20

1978 World Cup... Menotti's team line up ahead of their group game against France

Barcelona boss... Menotti on the Barca bench alongside Diego Maradona

Political battles ...Menotti with Argentina's former dictator Jorge Rafael Videla

World Cup – with Diego Maradona playing a starring role – in 1979, and, again with Maradona, claimed some early 1980s cups in a two-year spell with Barcelona. After that there was a season with Atletico Madrid, a brief spell with Sampdoria, some big clubs back home in Argentina plus some time in Uruguay and Mexico. But it all tailed off early – which is probably easy to explain. The whole experience of the 1978 World Cup took a great deal out of him.

In 1976, two years into his reign, Argentina suffered a military coup. Over the next few years, more than 30,000 of the country's brightest and most idealistic citizens were assassinated. Menotti lost friends. He was a left-wing cafe intellectual himself – but he was protected by his position. The military junta believed that he would lead the team to victory in a World Cup, which they envisaged as a public relations triumph for their regime.

What was Menotti to do? He could have jumped. Instead he stayed. His reasoning was that through his team he could send out a message of a different Argentina. He picked his battles – provoking the generals by saying that he disliked the term "tactics" because it was too military. He preferred "ideas". And his big idea was that his side were true representatives of Argentine working-class culture. Before the final, he made his players very aware that they were not playing for the medal wearers in the VIP seats, but rather for the many in the country who were having a hard time as the regime cracked down on trade unions.

The strain of those years was clear. It was a point that Menotti made himself in a book he published on how the World Cup was won. He puts a photo of himself in 1974 side-by-side with one from four years later. He looked as if he had aged 20 years in the process.

But if his most influential days as a coach were already behind him, he was just getting started as a wise voice worrying that football's balance between business and culture had tipped far too much in favour of the former, but also celebrating the game's enduring capacity to thrill. He used to say that the point of order and structure was to serve as a gateway to adventure – a motto Cesar Luis Menotti maintained for football and for life.

LEWIS MORGAN

"I would love to be part of the Scotland set-up and I'm not going to give up on that"

One of the most in-form players in MLS sits down with *World Soccer* to discuss his shining displays at New York Red Bulls, his previous spell at Inter Miami and his international aspirations with Scotland

You left Celtic in 2020 to join Inter Miami for their inaugural season in Major League Soccer. How did that transfer come about?
I hadn't really thought about moving to MLS. It wasn't something that was at the forefront of my mind. It was just something that my agent brought to me and said that there was interest from Miami's side in bringing me over for their inaugural season. I'd heard about interest pretty early, then it got to our Christmas break when I was in Dubai with Celtic at a training camp, and then it just went from 0-100 really quickly.

What's it like joining a brand-new football club? How do you build team spirit with a completely new set of players?
I joined MLS at a weird time because of COVID. We had the MLS Is Back tournament and everything was a little bit strange and out of the ordinary. But I loved my time there. One of the obstacles, especially with COVID, was that it was quite hard to cultivate that team spirit and culture. That takes time and it takes being able to interact with the guys, both on and off the pitch, and that was something we weren't really afforded the luxury of, so we did really feel like a new group. By the time we got to the second year, it felt a bit different and it felt like we were able to really establish a culture there.

The 2020 season was a really positive one for you personally, ending as Inter Miami's MVP. Did you expect to settle so quickly?
I always have confidence in myself. I'd had a rough couple of years at Celtic, I had a knee injury that set me back a little bit and I never really got going. I really did want a fresh start. I wanted to go somewhere and get back to being myself. Miami gave me the platform to do that. I enjoyed it; the first year especially was a good year for myself to be a regular starter again.

You arrived in the same year as marquee signings Blaise Matuidi and Gonzalo Higuain. Was there an excitement within the club around their arrivals?
Obviously they were big signings for us and it was good for me to learn things off them and share a changing room with them. They were great with me. But at the end of the day they're just team-mates once they walk in the door. There's that bit of excitement at the start, but then as soon as you're training they're part of the team and they never felt like they were anything other than that.

Since you left, Inter have signed Lionel Messi, Sergio Busquets and Luis Suarez...
There's actually not too many of my old team-mates still there. There's been quite a lot of transition at the club. They're a very ambitious club. They're a pretty new franchise, so I think it's only natural that there's going to be a lot of movement on the player side before they really get the squad settled, and that is what has happened.

By signing for New York Red Bulls, you went from being at one of the newest MLS franchises to one of the oldest. Did you get that feeling when you joined?
The feeling that I got when I came here was that it was really established and the culture was set in stone. Everyone knows what Red Bull is about and everyone knows what New York Red Bulls are about. It was really easy to come into the building and integrate with the team and attach myself with the club.

Another thing here is that with the size of the league, the amount of different states, it feels like there are different countries with the travel and everything. So each team is different, each team's dynamic is different. It definitely was a different environment to come into but one that I think I adapted to pretty quickly.

Your first season at the Red Bulls in 2022 was your most prolific, ending with another club MVP award. Was that the best campaign of your career so far?
I guess when you include the standard of the league, I would probably say yes. I had a similar year in 2017-18 with St Mirren, albeit it was in the Scottish Championship at the time. I think it was the first year that I was actually able to play off the left side, which is where I had my last really productive year at St Mirren, so I don't think that was a coincidence. It was one of the reasons for me to come here, because I knew I was going to be able to play in a role that I felt really comfortable with. The style of play definitely helped and the team helped. In terms of goals, assists and output, it was a really good year for me. ➤

Red Bull
NEW YORK

LEWIS MORGAN

In-form forward... Morgan has made a strong start to the 2024 season

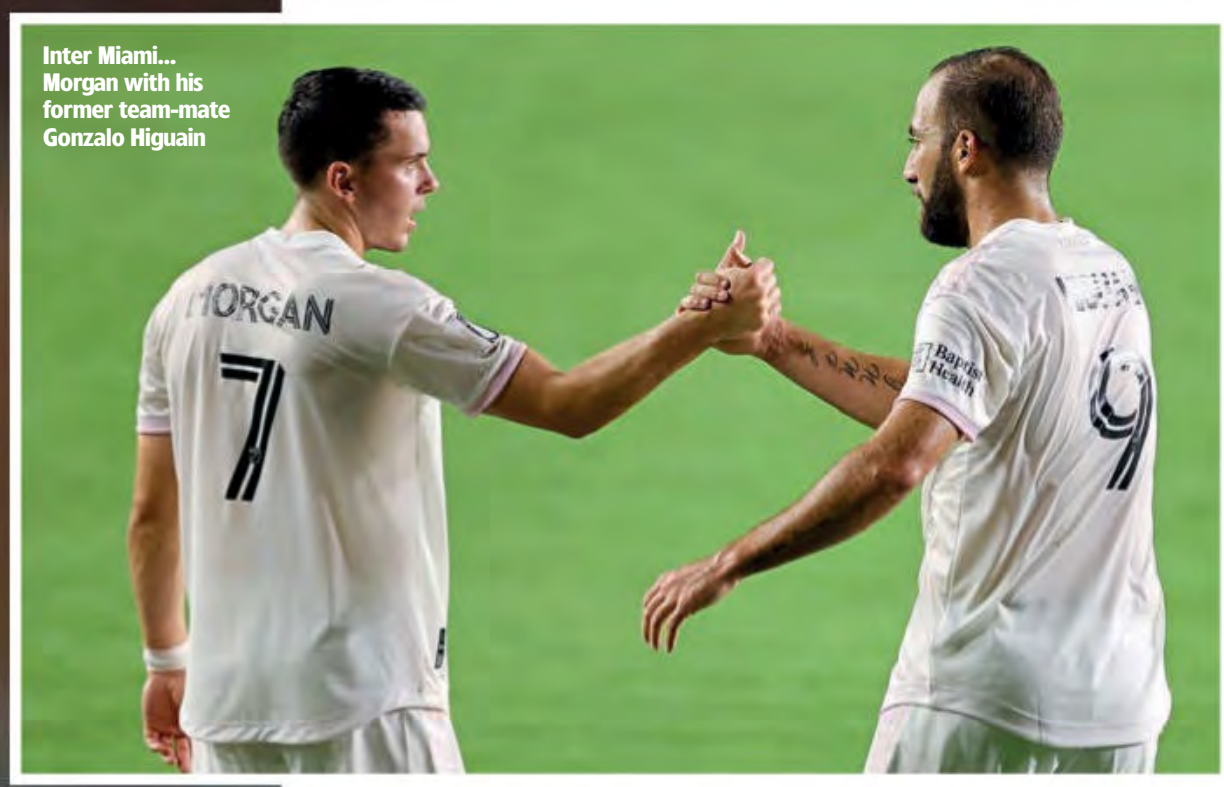
Productive...Morgan's career began at St Mirren

Is the left-wing position your preferred role then?
As long as I'm along the frontline, you'll never hear me complain. There were times before when I was playing as a wing-back, which doesn't really suit my qualities. If I could pick one position, it would be there.

You won two Scotland caps in 2018, but haven't been called up since moving to MLS. Is a return to the Scotland national team still on your mind?
The team has been doing so well. International football is always a little bit different in that you don't get loads of time with your players, so when you do get a group that is doing well it's natural that it's hard to break into that. I think when it comes to the national team you always have to be a fan first, so it's great to see them doing so well. But, selfishly, of course I would love to be a part of the set-up and I'm not going to give up on that. We'll see how it goes.

Should Steve Clarke pay more attention to Scottish players in the MLS?
Perhaps, but I would be speaking without the knowledge of maybe he is watching and I'm just not what he's looking for at the moment. But there are players over here – Johnny Russell [Sporting Kansas City] had exceptional years here, Ryan Gauld [Vancouver Whitecaps] has taken his game to another level here.

I know the qualities of this league stand up to probably most leagues outside the Premier League, which is a different animal in terms of finances and everything. But when I compare MLS to some of the other leagues, I think MLS is a level above the English Championship now. To see guys like Johnny Russell, Ryan Gauld and myself perform well over here, hopefully



Inter Miami... Morgan with his former team-mate Gonzalo Higuain

that is getting taken into context.

From a fan's perspective, how excited are you for the upcoming Euros?
It's really exciting for everyone in Scottish football. At the last Euros, it felt like maybe we were going there and seeing what happens, but I feel like there's a real feeling around that group and in particular the manager, who has done such a good job, that that team is going there to do something, not just going there to take part. I'm excited for them, and obviously they've got a big game against Germany to open up.

In 2023 you suffered with injuries. How frustrating was that after such an impressive 2022 campaign?
Obviously it was really disappointing. It just seemed to happen again and again. I ended up having surgery towards the end of the year in September. I was dealing with some impingement in my hamstring that needed surgery, but that then had a knock-on effect and I was picking up lots of severe muscle injuries that are really uncommon. That was a learning curve for me. I want to continue to feel better over the next few months.

NYRB signed Sweden international Emil Forsberg from RB Leipzig for 2024. How have you found working with him so far?
Amazing. He has been great for the group. He came in and is captaining the side. He brings a wealth of experience. You talk about me making the transition from Miami to here, but it's probably even easier for him [to transition from Leipzig], even though it was a different country – he's gone from one Red Bull system to another, so he has really seamlessly integrated himself with the group. He gets along with everyone and obviously has a lot of quality on the pitch as well, so it's exciting to be playing with him.

You have experienced the Old Firm – how does the Hudson River Derby compare?
The Old Firm is the biggest rivalry and derby in football, but for the Red Bulls this [the rivalry with New York City FC] is the biggest derby in the world, and that is what's so special about it. I've been lucky enough to play in them, win them, score in one of them, so they're always a special occasion for the club and the fans for the bragging rights. When you win, you send what feels like half the city home happy. It's massive. Obviously, the Old Firm is a different beast but every single time we play New York City, it's a big one for us and you definitely have a bit more going into those ones.

Have you got ambitions to come back to the UK, or are you planning to stay in MLS for the rest of your career?
I'm really happy here, really happy at Red Bull. Going back to Europe is not something that I really think about. My only focus now is making sure I get fit and can help the team win. We're building a group here that wants to compete and win things and I want to be a part of that for sure.

Interview by Jared Tinslay

> "The Old Firm is the biggest rivalry and derby in football, but for New York Red Bulls the Hudson River Derby is the biggest in the world"

International...Morgan alongside Scotland team-mates on his last call-up in November 2019 for a Euro 2020 qualifier

RONWEN WILLIAMS

"I analyse penalties all the time. I enjoy it"

South Africa's AFCON 2023 penalty shootout hero and national team captain discusses *Bafana Bafana*, his club career, tactics and more

You look settled now at Mamelodi Sundowns after two seasons at the club...
It has been challenging. It has been tough, because it's a massive club, but they made it easy for me to settle down. That was the most important thing, for me to settle as early as possible, as quickly as I could. Settling down quickly helped me enjoy and show my worth.

What is it like playing for such an all-conquering club?
It's the attention to detail. They check for the smallest detail, that extra 0.01 per cent to make you a better player. That's how we are at the club, always looking to do better, even though we've been winning and haven't lost many times. We analyse everything. They ask us to watch soccer all the time, to see how the bigger clubs in Europe are doing it, and we learn from them, we steal ideas and try to implement them to take our game to the next level. So all credit must go to the coaching staff, especially to Rhulani [Mokwena, Sundowns' head coach], because he's always looking for ways to improve his players, to improve the team. You'll find him sending you video clips in the middle of the night, games to watch from overseas. He'll be tagging you on things on social media, things that he feels you need to improve. That's why we've been so successful; we don't rest on our laurels, we're always looking to improve every day.

How exciting will it be to possibly play against the likes of Manchester City and Real Madrid in next year's Club World Cup?
That we're going to be part of this expanded tournament, with so many teams, speaks volumes for the club and the direction we want to go. We were part of the first African Football League too. It just shows the level that we are at and what we want to achieve as a club.

Mokwena has given you credit for some tactical innovations this past season. Are you able to make suggestions to him?
Yes, all the time. You'll see me sometimes during the game running up to him and discussing something. Sometimes I don't feel comfortable with a certain way, and he's fine with that. He's given me the license, the freedom to make changes if needs be, because, obviously, I can see things better on the day in the game. We've built that trust between us that allows me sometimes to change the build-up, to change the structure or change the way we press. He's very open to suggestions from the players.

How much do you enjoy thinking about the game, tactics and coming up with concepts?
I love it. It's so interesting to see where the game is. As much as everyone is playing a different way, there are so many clues, you can see lots of trends and ideas and you try to follow them, see how you can become better. I just love it because it keeps me motivated, it keeps me hungry, to want to learn, to look to improve. I'm excited to go to training every morning because I know I'm going to learn something new.

How intense is the competition in the African Champions League?
It's so tough. They try to make everything so difficult for you. The fans, the whistles...you can't hear yourself on the field. The lasers, the flares, they try by all means to put you off. But I think we are used to it, because we've been part of the Champions League for such a long time. You can see now when we go away that we don't panic as much as before. And I think that does rub off on *Bafana Bafana* as we can go anywhere on the continent now and we're so calm because we play in these situations week in, week out, especially in the Champions League. So we actually enjoy these tough encounters, the atmosphere. It brings the best out of us.

Were you surprised that South Africa got as far as the AFCON semi-finals?
Not at all. In many interviews I've done over the last year, I told the journalists that I could see *Bafana Bafana* doing well at AFCON and no one believed. But we knew what we were building, we knew the brotherhood we had and the talent that I've seen at Sundowns, as well as *Bafana Bafana*. If you have the brotherhood and the team spirit is tops, there's nothing that can stand in your way. And that's what we've built over the last two or three years at *Bafana Bafana*. The unity can carry you when you don't maybe have the best players.

How did you react to being drawn in the same World Cup qualifying group as Nigeria?
We always knew that we were going to get a tough team because of our ranking, and we enjoy these games. Yes, obviously, we know our record is not good against Nigeria. But someway, somehow, we need to break it, so now is the perfect time for us. Having played them and dominated them at AFCON – I feel we should have won the game [South Africa lost on penalties after a 1-1 draw] – we have high hopes. When you look at all the stats, we created more clear-cut chances during the game, during the 90 minutes. Now it's up to us to believe. When you play them, you don't need any motivation. It's against the other small countries where we have let ourselves down, drawing with Eswatini and Namibia.

You made headlines for your penalty-saving heroics at AFCON. What is your secret?
Study and watch. Watch your opponents, watch a lot of football, study, analyse the opposition. I analyse penalties all the time. I enjoy it. I've always enjoyed it. And I've always been good at it. But at the end of the day, it's still a lottery, so I'm just glad that most of the time, I can do my best and save.

Those penalty exploits also saw you linked with a move to Europe...
Maybe it's a bit late for me now. And, obviously, I'm not the tallest. It needs to make sense, to leave a club whose ambitions are so big, and so, like I said, I'm happy at the club. I enjoy the pressure; I enjoy being part of the club. But if something comes along, and the club is happy to let me go...

Interview by Mark Gleeson

Celebrate Africa CAF
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Glenn Moore

Brazil to host 2027 World Cup

Brazilian bid trumps European and North American rivals to seal the first South American Women's World Cup

After a vote that was more of a coronation than an election, Brazil will host the 2027 Women's World Cup, making it the second successive southern hemisphere women's finals and the first in South America.

The decision had been widely expected once the joint USA-Mexico bid withdrew 18 days prior. Though always unlikely to win given the finals were sandwiched by the 2026 men's World Cup co-hosted with Canada and the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, the late withdrawal suggested they had been given the word.

That left only the joint Belgium-Netherlands-Germany (BNG) bid as Brazil's competition, but rumours quickly spread that they were also wasting their time – and that seemed to be confirmed when FIFA's evaluation report unexpectedly scored Brazil higher. Sure enough, the Brazilian bid claimed the win with 119 votes to 78.

"Congratulations to Brazil," said FIFA president Gianni Infantino. "We will have the best World Cup in Brazil."

What is not in dispute is the tournament has the potential to leave a far greater legacy in South America than in Europe. Although Brazil, like many countries, banned women's football for decades in the 20th century, they were subsequently one of the first nations to make an impact. They reached the semi-finals at the third World Cup in 1999, the final in 2007, and produced the game's first global superstar in Marta.

Brazil continues to produce star players – in April, Houston Dash more than doubled the world-record fee for a defender, paying a reported $500,000 to Corinthians for Tarciane – but the national team has been left behind by Europe's advance. They failed to make the quarter-finals in 2015 and 2019, and were knocked out in the group stage in 2023.

Other South American nations have made little impression. Only Colombia have made the quarter-finals, at the third attempt in 2023. Argentina are yet to get past the group stage in four finals, while Chile and Ecuador failed to escape the group stage on their solitary appearances. In 2023 qualifying, Chile and Paraguay were knocked out by Haiti and Panama respectively.

These results are unsurprising. The continent has been beset by stories of players being poorly paid and inadequately resourced. In December 2023 the South American branch of FIFPro, the players union, released a survey of 1,100 top-division players based in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela.

> "Congratulations to Brazil. We will have the best World Cup in Brazil"
>
> FIFA president Gianni Infantino

Less than a quarter were full-time professional footballers, with the rest combining playing with working or studying – or in the case of 18 per cent, trying to fit in all three activities. Fewer than a quarter were paid above their country's legal minimum wage with more than a quarter not being paid at all. Only a third said their training facilities were adequate, with a quarter reporting they did not even have showers and hot water available.

This situation at club level is often no better when players graduate to the national side with poor training, minimal match fees – if any – and some questionable coach behaviour.

And that is when they play. In the 2010s, most teams had periods when they dropped out of the FIFA women's world rankings entirely for being "inactive". They would play World Cup qualifiers then go into hibernation until the next Copa America Femenina.

Brazil, thanks in part to the draw of both the national brand and Marta, have long had a full programme. However, five CONMEBOL nations did not play at all between 2015 and 2017, and three others had a break of at least two years. As recently as 2020, Paraguay, Colombia, Peru, Uruguay, Bolivia and Venezuela did not have a single fixture.

This neglect is only part of the story. That lack of oversight, combined with misogynistic attitudes, has fostered abusive environments.

The FIFPro survey revealed widespread sexual harassment with 73 per cent of respondents claiming to have experienced it. In many cases, this takes the form of inappropriate comments or gestures about their bodies or sexual orientation, but in some it extends to sexual violence. In rare cases, these have ended up in court.

In the circumstances a Women's World Cup in Brazil, with its power to showcase successful women, to rally populations behind them – and push administrations into backing them – can be a hugely powerful force for good.

And the winner is ...Infantino reveals the 2027 Women's World Cup hosts

World Cup hosts...Brazil are unveiled as 2027 hosts

End of season round-up

Chelsea manager Emma Hayes signs off in style, as the Blues become one of several teams across Europe to retain their title

Until the last day of March, Emma Hayes had been hoping to sign off on a remarkable 12 years as manager of Chelsea with the quadruple, something only previously accomplished in the English game by Arsenal in 2007, when she was assistant manager to Vic Akers.

By the first day of May, though, it looked as if she would be heading to the US national team this summer off the back of a rare trophyless season. Beset by injuries, Chelsea had lost the League Cup final to Arsenal, the FA Cup semi-final to Manchester United and the Champions League semi-final to Barcelona, and a 4-3 defeat at Liverpool left them trailing Manchester City in the Women's Super League with two fixtures left.

Four days later, Arsenal's Stina Blackstenius scored in the 89th and 92nd minutes at City to inflict a shock defeat and Chelsea were back in the box seat. They subsequently thrashed Bristol City 8-0 and Manchester United 6-0 to take the title – their fifth in succession – on goal difference.

Arsenal, in third, claimed the other Champions League qualifying spot. Manchester United had the notable consolation of a first trophy, winning the FA Cup thanks to a 4-0 defeat of Tottenham Hotspur in front of 76,082 in the Wembley final. That earned Marc Skinner a contract extension, despite some unrest in the support base after a fifth-placed league finish.

In Spain, Barcelona also won a fifth title on the spin, but rather more easily.

Germany's top two...Wolfsburg and Bayern Munich each claimed a trophy in 2023-24

Fond farewell...Emma Hayes holds the Women's Super League trophy with her Chelsea players

A 7-0 win over Athletic Club wrapped things up with three matches to spare and, at that point, only two points dropped in 27 matches. They followed up by beating Real Sociedad 8-0 in the Copa de la Reina final watched by 25,617 in Zaragoza. Real Madrid took second place in the league.

Bayern Munich successfully defended the Frauen Bundesliga title, a 4-0 win at Wolfsburg in March in front of 24,437 effectively sealing a title that was confirmed with two matches to spare. Wolfsburg were second with Eintracht Frankfurt also qualifying for Europe.

Bayern will be favourites again next season having already secured the transfer of Wolfsburg's best player, Lena Oberdorf.

The Lady Wolves, however, hit back in the cup final, beating Bayern 2-0 before a crowd of 44,000 in Cologne to win the DFB-Pokal Frauen for a remarkable tenth season in succession.

In Italy, Roma backed up their first title in 2023 by defending it, with Juventus and Fiorentina also making it into Europe.

With Lyon having won 16 of the previous 17 titles, the French Federation brought in a play-off system this season, part of a range of measures to make the league more attractive to fans, television and sponsors.

It did not faze Lyon. Having won the regular season ahead of PSG, they beat their arch-rivals again in the play-off final, Delphine Cascarino and Kadidiatou Diani scoring the goals in a 2-1 win, having defeated Reims 6-0 in the semis. Paris FC, having lost their semi-final on penalties to PSG, beat Reims the same way in the third-place match to take the third European spot.

In the cup, PSG beat Fleury 1-0 with a Lieke Martens goal.

Elsewhere, Slavia Prague and Benfica retained the Czech and Portuguese league titles respectively meaning the champions of Europe's seven highest-ranking winter leagues (by UEFA co-efficient) all retained their titles.

French play-off winners...Lyon striker Kadidiatou Diani celebrates scoring against arch-rivals PSG

Polten also secured their ninth successive league trophy in Austria.

However, Twente regained the Dutch crown from Ajax, while in Scotland there was a new champion. Four days after Celtic men's side clinched their 54th title, the women's team won their first. Beaten in the dying seconds by Rangers last year, they pipped their Old Firm rivals on goal difference thanks to Amy Gallacher's 90th-minute winner against Hibernian at Celtic Park.

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In the next issue

***World Soccer*'s July 2024 edition is a bumper 116-page special issue, which comprehensively reviews the 2023-24 club season and previews the 2024 Olympic football tournaments.**

We look back at the big stories and talking points of 2023–24, provide analysis on Europe's top leagues, and review the UEFA Champions League, Europa League and Europa Conference League finals.

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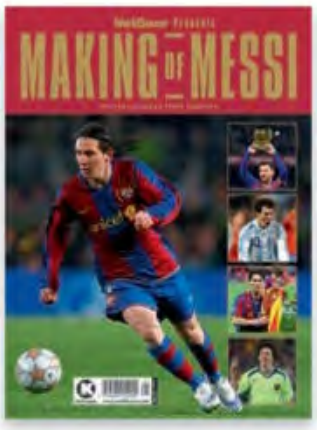

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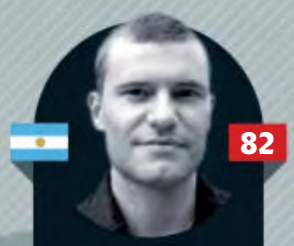

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Africa

MARK GLEESON

Al Ahly champions of Africa once again

Egyptian giants extend their record as the kings of the continent with 12th African Champions League success

There was an overwhelming sense of familiarity about this season's Champions League campaign – not only in the identity of the winners, as Egypt's Al Ahly won the title for the fourth time in five years, but also in the measured way in which they went about their business, again not overtly impressive in the group stage but still qualifying comfortably before surging through the knockout stages to take the trophy.

They edged Esperance from Tunisia by a lone, scrappy goal over the two legs of the final, but it was a deserved success – their 12th in total, extending their record as the competition's most successful team, far in excess of the next best clubs, Egypt's Zamalek and TP Mazembe of Democratic Republic of Congo, on five each.

Captain Rami Rabia, who now has six winners' medals, headed home the only goal in the fourth minute of the second leg in Cairo from Hussein El Shahat's corner. It took a deflection off Roger Aholou and crept into the corner of the net, but it seemed

African Champions again...Al Ahly lift the CAF Champions League trophy for a record 12th time

Home support... Ahly were roared on by their 60,000 crowd in Cairo

Heartbroken...Esperance's Roger Aholou, scorer of the decisive own goal in the final

harsh that the goal was subsequently credited as an own goal by Esperance's Togo international midfielder.

But Ahly could have secured a more emphatic scoreline had they taken all their chances, and their failure to do so always left the door open for Esperance, who nearly netted when their Brazilian attacker Yan Sasse curled an effort narrowly wide after a swift one-two with compatriot Rodrigo Rodrigues on the hour mark of the second leg.

So tight were the defences over the two legs of the final that had Esperance found the net in Cairo they would have been odds-on to win the cup on the away goals rule. While Europe has dispensed with that tie-breaker method, it remains important in the African game and led to both sides playing with caution.

Al Ahly put up the shutters in the first leg of the final in Tunis and, with hosts Esperance determined not to concede on their own patch, it was a dour affair. Rodrigues had the Tunisian club's only real opportunity, even with rabid home support willing them on to secure an advantage to take to Cairo a week later.

It was no surprise to see the first leg end goalless, Esperance's sixth 0-0 of the competition. Defence rather than attack had seen them through to their ninth Champions League final and third head-to-head against Al Ahly. In early December, they conceded three goals in a group-stage defeat to Al Hilal of Sudan, but then responded by not conceding again until the final match. That nine-game sequence included their four remaining group games, the quarter-final tie against ASEC Abidjan of the Ivory Coast, which they won on penalties after a goalless aggregate stalemate, and the semi-final victory over much-fancied Mamelodi Sundowns.

Esperance beat the South Africans 2-0 on aggregate, winning both ties by a single goal. Sundowns, the club that is owned by Confederation of African Football (CAF) president Patrice Motsepe, won last November's inaugural African Football League title and again looked the team to beat in the group phase but, once more, lost their nerve in the latter stages. Again, an all too familiar tale of the Champions League.

But even in defeat, Sundowns did fortuitously earn a spot in next year's Club World Cup. Africa has four places at the new-look tournament in the United States, reserved for the winners of the four Champions League competitions between 2021 and 2024, but as Al Ahly have now won three of them, the door was opened for perennial contenders.

Wydad Casablanca of Morocco, champions in 2022, have also secured their berth in the US, with the other two places determined by a ranking of performances in the CAF Champions League over the past four years, with Esperance top and Sundowns next.

Ahly's path to success this year was built on their performances at home. Under the guidance of Swiss coach Marcel Koller, they played seven home games in this year's competition without conceding a single goal, with the 3-0 win over TP Mazembe in the second leg of their semi-final particularly impressive.

> **Al Ahly could have secured a more emphatic scoreline had they taken all their chances, and their failure to do so always left the door open for Esperance**

Such dominance was all the more impressive given that Egypt's government have tried to restrict the size of crowds because of fears of political agitation by the ultras since the Arab Spring of over a decade ago. However, the authorities dare not risk public ire when it comes to major matches, so a capacity 60,000-strong crowd for the second leg of the final in Cairo was impressively noisy and uniform in their red colours, roaring the team to success.

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

Asian champions ...Al Ain players celebrate with their trophy

Review

Al Ain champions of Asia

Emirati club, coached by former Argentina striker Hernan Crespo, sees off Harry Kewell's Yokohama F. Marinos in AFC Champions League final

Hernan Crespo had a smile as wide as a Buenos Aires boulevard on May 25 as he lifted the AFC Champions League trophy. His Al Ain team from the United Arab Emirates had just defeated Yokohama F. Marinos 5-1 in the second leg of the final to take the trophy 6-3 on aggregate.

"I am not a genius," said the 48-year-old. "What is most important is the players. They played with great heart. Doing it in a final is not easy but the players did it. I am so proud to have won the AFC Champions League."

It was the second time the Asian crown had come to the UAE club and the second continental title Crespo has won after leading Defensa y Justicia from his home country to the 2020 Copa Sudamericana.

Al Ain won in 2003 and had lost in two finals since. Going down 2-1 away from home in the first leg was not a bad result but a little disappointing considering they had taken an early lead in Yokohama's Nissan Stadium through Mohammed Al Baloushi and then had a second strike ruled out by VAR for offside. Roared on by 53,000 fans, the Japanese team – coached by Harry Kewell – continued to attack and scored twice late on through Asahi Uenaka and Kota Watanabe.

It left the tie wide open as the action switched to Al Ain, a pleasant oasis city near the border with Oman, two weeks

later. Soufiane Rahimi, already the tournament's leading goalscorer with 12, grabbed his 13th early on to make it all square. Soon after, the Moroccan was brought down in the area for Kaku to score from the spot.

Just before the break Yan Matheus scored for Yokohama and it was 3-3 on aggregate, but then came the real turning point as Marinos keeper William Popp brought down Rahimi outside the box and was sent off. It meant that in the second half, Al Ain were able to score three more: another from Rahimi and a late brace from Kodjo Laba. It was a painful end for the visitors.

"My players were fantastic," said Kewell. "It's just a shame that we got robbed tonight by a bad referee. I thought the refereeing decisions were shocking, they were terrible. They were playing the game and he fell for it."

Vital moment... Yokohama keeper William Popp is sent off

Both teams had come through tough semi-final tests. Indeed, neither was the favourite to make it all the way. Even though Al Ain saw off Al Nassr at the last-eight stage thanks to a penalty shootout – with only Cristiano Ronaldo scoring for the Riyadh club – Al Hilal were expected to be too strong. After all, the four-time Asian champions had set a world-record winning streak of 34 games and were strolling their way to a 19th Saudi Arabian league triumph.

> "My players were fantastic. It's just a shame that we got robbed tonight by a bad referee"
>
> Yokohama F. Marinos coach Harry Kewell

Yet Al Ain picked up a famous 4-2 victory in the first leg as Rahimi grabbed a hat-trick. The second leg in Riyadh was far from a foregone conclusion and it looked ominous when Ruben Neves reduced the deficit after just four minutes, but Crespo's men withstood some serious pressure to come away with a 2-1 loss and a 5-4 aggregate win. Had Aleksandar Mitrovic been fit then it may have been very different but the injured Serbian striker, on fire in the Saudi Pro League, could only watch from the sidelines.

"Every time, we were underdogs – in the quarter-finals, semi-finals – but I believed, and every time the players did it," said Crespo. "We deserve the title."

Yokohama may have five Japanese championships to their name, with Ange Postecoglou and Kevin Muscat winning four and five in 2019 and 2022 respectively, but domestic form under Kewell, who took charge at the end of December, had been mediocre. A semi-final against Ulsan HD, the Korean champions of the past two seasons and two-time Champions League winners in 2012 and 2020, was a big ask.

Victorious...Al Ain head coach Hernan Crespo

The first leg ended in a narrow 1-0 defeat for the Marinos who had plenty of chances to get something to take back east. They could take confidence and belief however and, at home, went at the Tigers from the get go, racing into a 3-0 lead by the half-hour. But – still in the first half – Ulsan pulled one back, Yokohama had a man sent off, and then the Koreans scored again to make it 3-3 on aggregate and themselves favourites to go through.

But the Japanese team held on and, eventually, squeezed through on penalties to reached their first-ever final. Sadly for them, it just didn't go quite the way they wanted.

Defeated...Yokohama boss Harry Kewell

Oceania

STEVE MENARY

Auckland City's dominance continues

Side from New Zealand win their third consecutive OFC Champions League crown – but gap to the rest of the continent is closing

The end result was more predictable than ever as Auckland City beat their Tahitian hosts AS Pirae to claim a record 12th OFC Champions League crown, but the earlier stages showed further signs of the gap closing.

New Zealand's grand final runners-up have now won the last three OFC titles and ten of the last 12 dating back to 2011, but only won Group A on goal difference after being held 2-2 by Fijian side Rewa in their opening game.

Auckland captain Cam Howieson put his team ahead before the game took a dramatic turn in a crazy six-minute spell. Two goals in three minutes from Josaia Sela briefly put the Fijians ahead, before Ryan de Vries equalised for Auckland in the 67th minute.

The New Zealanders had to settle for a point, and then only just took all three in their next game after a 93rd-minute goal from Liam Gillion saw off 2010 champions Hekari United from Papua New Guinea. Their final game was more comfortable at least, thrashing Solomon Warriors 5-0 to seal top spot.

By that stage, the Solomon Islands champions had already been eliminated after losing their first game to Hekari and then being edged out 3-2 by Rewa. Meanwhile, Hekari went into the final match of Group A needing a win against Rewa to claim a semi-final spot. The game was in the balance going into the final minutes, but a goal from Fijian attacking midfielder Tevita Waranaivalu claimed a 3-2 win for Rewa, who went through in second place.

In Group B, Vaivase-Tai, Samoa's representatives – and the sole qualifier from the preliminary round – put up

Champions of Oceania...Auckland City at last year's Club World Cup

some resistance but predictably found themselves outclassed. Alton Leiataua's goal in a 5-1 defeat against Vanuatu's Ifira Black Bird in their final game was Vaivase-Tai's sole return and at least represented an improvement on a 6-0 opening defeat to Pirae and an 8-0 drubbing from New Caledonia's AS Magenta.

With the two French territories grinding out a 0-0 draw and winning both their other games, Pirae claimed top spot by a single goal after Magenta could only beat Ifira Black Bird 2-1 in their final game thanks to a stoppage-time winner – Pirae had thrashed the Vanuatuan outfit 5-1.

In the first of the semi-finals, Auckland faced old rivals Magenta, who had knocked the New Zealanders out at the same stage in 2019. Germain Haewegene had scored eight goals in 11 games in the New Caledonia Premier League and five in the group stages, but Pierre Wajoka's side had three days less to recover from their last game compared to their opponents and laboured.

Goalkeeper Conor Tracey kept a third consecutive clean sheet for Auckland and 17-year-old Stipe Ukich converted in the 66th minute at Stade Pater to take Albert Riera's side into their 12th Champions League final since 2006.

Local favourites AS Pirae then took the field against Rewa at Stade Pater for what would turn out to be the tournament's most sensational game. Pirae had fallen to another Fijian side Suva at the same stage in 2023 and were trailing to Patrick Joseph's 35th-minute penalty until stoppage time, when Desire Ngiamba equalised from a spot-kick before putting his side 2-1 ahead just moments later.

But Rodeck Singh's side were not done and Samu Kautoga's header took the game into extra-time. Patrick Tepa put the Tahitians back in front and then, despite a brave effort from Rewa, they fell further behind in the 111th minute, when defender Peniame Drova failed to properly connect with a defensive header and put the ball past his own goalkeeper Isikeli Sevanaia to settle the tie 4-2.

The final was a rematch of 2006, when both Auckland and Pirae were making their Champions League final debuts. The New Zealanders have since appeared in 11 more finals, including the last three, but Pirae have only qualified for the final stages sporadically and had made the semi-final just twice before, in 2014 and last year.

Attendances at Stade Pater and Stade Paea were poor and sometimes only edged into three figures. Even Pirae's semi-final only attracted an estimated 400 people, but the final proved more of an attraction, although still short of four figures.

The final was a rematch of 2006, when both Auckland and Pirae were making their Champions League final debuts

Pirae started brightly with Ngiamba a threat down the left side, but just six minutes was on the clock when Howieson's free-kick was side-footed in by Michael den Heijer. The Tahitians tried to respond but found themselves further behind before half-time when a superb through-ball from Spaniard Gerard Garriga found Player of the Tournament Gillion, who made no mistake. Ukich – Auckland's semi-final Man of the Match – added a third just after the break and Christian Gray put the result beyond all doubt in the 59th minute.

With no signs of their dominance ending, Auckland City will go on to represent Oceania in FIFA's new annual club competition, the Intercontinental Cup, in December.

Silverware...the OFC Champions League trophy

Club captain... Auckland City's Cam Howieson

Argentina

JOEL RICHARDS

More glory for Estudiantes

La Plata side lift the Copa de la Liga six months after winning the Copa Argentina

Argentina's Copa de la Liga delivered a thrilling final, the drama culminating with Estudiantes de La Plata defeating Velez Sarsfield in a penalty shootout.

For Estudiantes it was a second title in the space of a few months, having won the Copa Argentina in December. Coach Eduardo Dominguez now takes his place in the pantheon of the club's legends alongside the likes of Osvaldo Zubeldia, Carlos Bilardo, Diego Simeone and Alejandro Sabella, although the 45-year-old dismissed any similarities to his predecessors: "It is impossible to compare me to Sabella," he said.

The club's lineage was central to their success after over a decade without silverware: from the 2006 league title-winning side were captain Jose "The Prince" Sosa and Pablo Piatti, both back after long spells in Europe; from Alejandro Sabella's 2009 Copa Libertadores and 2010 title-winning side was 38-year-old midfielder Enzo Perez, who returned to La Plata after several successful years at River Plate, as well as spells with Valencia and Benfica; and centre-back Federico Fernandez, a veteran of those two titles, was also an influential squad member.

In addition to the experience of previous title-winning teams was centre-forward Guido Carrillo, the team's top scorer in the Copa de la Liga with five goals, and midfielder Santiago Ascacibar, both back at the club where they started their careers.

While Estudiantes were able to draw on players with vast experience and a strong identification with the club, Velez played the final with a team of youngsters. The academy system of *El Fortin* (The Little Fort) is regarded as one of the strongest in the country, and that came to fruition once more as a young side progressed to the final of the Copa de la Liga.

Gustavo Quinteros' team ended the final with eight academy graduates on the field, with 18-year-old Alejo Sarco scoring the team's equaliser in what was only his fourth professional appearance.

Sarco's goal cancelled out Eros Mancuso's early strike, taking the game to a shootout, where a new Estudiantes hero was born. Goalkeeper Matias Mansilla had already saved two

Champions ...Estudiantes celebrate with the trophy

Returning hero... Pablo Piatti salutes the supporters

penalties against Boca Juniors in the semi-final and, in the final, he stopped three penalties to hand the title to Estudiantes.

"We have history and we are showing that – with fewer resources than Boca or River," said club president Juan Sebastian Veron. Once one of the top midfielders in Europe – playing for the likes of Manchester United, Chelsea, Internazionale, Lazio, Sampdoria and Parma – like many of this year's heroes Veron returned to Estudiantes to finish his career, captaining Sabella's Libertadores and league title-winning team over a decade ago.

The former Argentina international remains an influential figure in the game, now from the boardroom. In recent months, Veron has been one of the central figures in Argentina's debate over clubs' futures. "I have no doubt that the growth of an institution needs the private and public sectors to work hand in hand," he said.

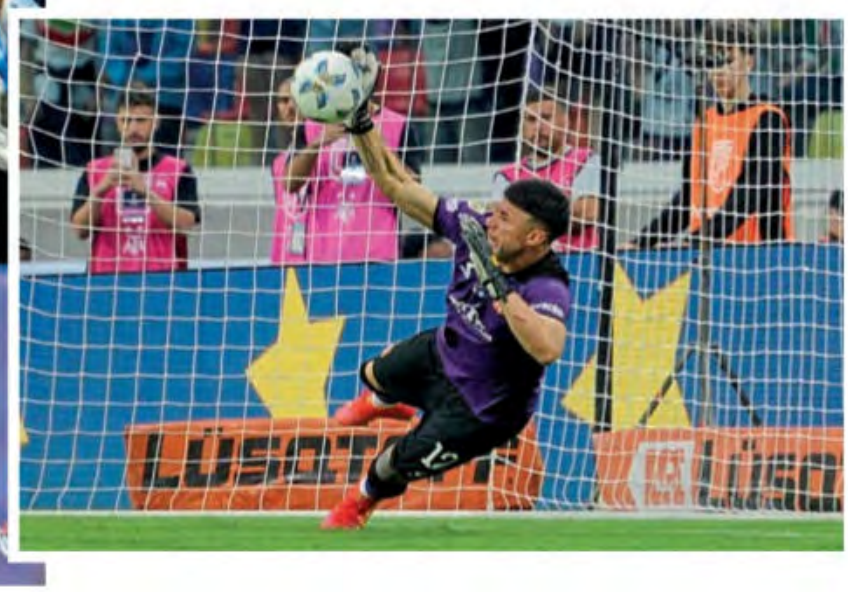
This position has seen him clash with members of AFA. Argentina's Football Association fiercely opposes any changes to the model in which clubs are non-profit civil organisations and supporters vote for club presidents. Yet with his vision of bringing in private investment, he has support from Argentina's president Javier Milei, the far-right libertarian who aims to privatise vast swathes of Argentina's economy – including football clubs.

"Argentine football could be so much better, in every sense," argued Veron in March. Argentine sides are slipping behind the Brazilian clubs in the Copa Libertadores and Sudamericana competitions. Many clubs are struggling financially. And the Copa de la Liga saw a plague of cruciate ligament injuries, with over 20 players suffering serious injury. The busy calendar of games, the poor state of pitches and even the type of boots used by players are amongst the reasons experts have suggested so many injuries have occurred.

The question is whether private investment would improve results, infrastructure and how the game is organised. Veron believes it would. Those who defend the current model argue that clubs are part of the social fabric.

Few figures in the game defended football's social role and importance as Cesar Luis Menotti, Argentina's revolutionary 1978 World Cup-winning coach. News of his passing broke during the final between Estudiantes and Velez, and applause from both sets of fans rang out. In one of his last interviews before his death, Menotti offered his opinion over the future of clubs: "Football in Argentina is a cultural phenomenon. Clubs don't belong to the president of AFA or to anyone, they belong to the members."

> "We have history and we are showing that"
>
> Estudiantes president Juan Sebastian Veron



Shootout star... Matias Mansilla saves a penalty in the final

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Adrian Martinez (Racing)
Nicknamed Marvellous Martinez, the well-travelled 31-year-old striker was the standout individual performer with two brilliant hat-tricks in the group phase.

NEWCOMER OF THE SEASON
Alejo Sarco (Velez Sarsfield)
An Argentina youth international, the 18-year-old forward is arguably the pick of Velez's crop of talented youngsters.

Exciting talent... Alejo Sarco

COACH OF THE SEASON
Eduardo Dominguez (Estudiantes)
The 45-year-old coach added a second Copa de la Liga title to his name after guiding Colon to an historic first success in 2021.

India

JOHN DUERDEN

A trophy each for Mohun and Mumbai

Mohun Bagan and Mumbai City both take home silverware at the end of India's 2023-24 league campaign

Review

There is a debate in India as to which is the better, or bigger, prize to win: the Indian Super League (ISL) shield, which goes to the number one at the end of the 22 regular games, or the ISL Cup. The latter is a knockout contest featuring the top six teams with two emerging to play in the final. Most go with the former, especially as the shield winners go into the Asian Champions League.

That will suit Mohun Bagan, who dramatically beat Mumbai City in the final game of the regular season to move above them to take first. The roles were reversed in the ISL Cup final as Mumbai won 3-1. Both came so close to doing the double, but both can look back with plenty of pride.

It was a fitting success for the league winners, one of Asia's oldest clubs that was founded way back in 1889, which became officially known as Mohun Bagan Super Giant in 2023 following a change in ownership.

The run to the league title was not a smooth one. Head coach Juan Ferrando was fired early in the New Year after three straight league losses. Technical director Antonio Lopez Habas –

ISL Shield champions...Mohun Bagan Super Giant topped the regular season table

ISL Cup winners... Mumbai City players lift the trophy after beating Mohun Bagan
Credit: Alamy

another Spaniard, the fourth in a row at the club – took over. The Super Giants won nine of the last 11 and, on the last day of the season, lifted the shield in front of over 60,000 fans after defeating Mumbai 2-1 to jump above the visitors and finish top.

Up top, the twin Australian threats of Jason Cummings and Dimitri Petratos impressed for Mohun Bagan, with both hitting double figures. Petratos also finished joint-second in terms of assists and was awarded the Golden Ball. It was exciting stuff and the fans responded with an average of almost 35,000, the best in India and beaten in Asia only by the big Japanese and Chinese clubs.

> **Both came so close to doing the double, but both can look back with plenty of pride**

Meanwhile, Mumbai were at it from the get-go, unbeaten in the first nine, as they looked to defend their shield won last season, although those hopes took a knock with the mid-season departure of head coach Des Buckingham to Oxford United. The club – part of the City Football Group stable – still went into the final day two points clear at the top before travelling across to Kolkata for that key defeat.

Despite the defeat, there were reasons to be cheerful. Amongst a dearth of Indian players in the top scorers list, the two best local performers in front of goal wore Sky Blue. Lallianzuala Chhangte, widely regarded as the best domestic player of the season and perhaps the best full stop, netted ten and also recorded six assists, while young striker Vikram Singh also managed eight to earn the prize for the league's emerging talent.

At least Mumbai had the cup as consolation; FC Goa ended what was looking like an unforgettable season with nothing to show. They went past the halfway stage without losing, with nine wins and three draws, and then took five wins and two draws from the final seven. The problem was the three games in between, three consecutive losses, which did the damage. In the end, Goa finished third but were just three points off the top.

Odisha were happier in fourth, the best finish in their five-year history. The club are trying to establish themselves as a force just as the state they represent are trying to become the sporting capital of India. This involves cricket, hockey, swimming and more – and a champion football team wouldn't go amiss either. It's a bit too soon for that but they seem to be progressing and had they not had a late slump, with just four points in the last five games, may even have broken into the top three.

Mid-season departure...Des Buckingham left Mumbai City for Oxford United in November

The Juggernauts also got to the last four in the ISL Cup, losing there narrowly to Mohun Bagan after getting past Kerala Blasters who ended fifth. The southern powerhouse paid the price for a poor second half of the season after starting so well. Chennaiyin squeezed into the top six, despite losing more than they won and having a minus-ten goal difference, but were never likely to get past Goa.

In their first season in the ISL, Punjab FC did decently, finishing eighth, just three points off the top six. At the bottom, Hyderabad waited late into the campaign to record their one and only win. Much improvement is required next season if they are to challenge the likes of Mohun Bagan and Mumbai City.

SEASON'S BEST

PLAYER OF THE SEASON
Dimitri PETRATOS (Mohun Bagan)
Finishing high in both the scoring and assist charts, the 31-year-old Australian forward has looked completely at home in India since arriving in 2022.

Aussie emigrant ...Petratos left Western Sydney Wanderers in 2022

NEWCOMER OF THE YEAR
Parthib GOGOI
(NorthEast United)
The 21-year-old scored five goals for a team that struggled to get going, and was rewarded with a call-up for India's Under-23 team.

COACH OF THE SEASON
Sergio LOBERA (Odisha)
The Spaniard led Odisha to their highest-ever league finish and got them close to the final whilst also impressing in Asia's AFC Cup.

Qatar

JOHN DUERDEN

Destination Paris

Asia's three Olympic representatives are decided after the Under-23 Asian Cup in Qatar

Paris-bound ...Uzbekistan's Abdurauf Buriev celebrates beating Indonesia in the semi-finals

Under-23 Asian champions... Japan players lift the trophy

For the second successive time Uzbekistan lost out in the final of the Under-23 Asian Cup in May, with Japan winning 1-0 in Qatar and taking the crown from Saudi Arabia. It was harsh on the Central Asians who had the better of a hard-fought match, but a fine 91st-minute strike from Fuki Yamada, stroking home from outside the box after a delightful backheel from Ryotaro Araki, settled the game.

That wasn't the last of the action though, as there was still time for an Uzbekistan penalty. The effort from Umarali Rakhmonaliev wasn't a bad one, but Benfica goalkeeper Leo Kokubo guessed right and pushed the ball out for a corner and that was that.

There was considerable consolation for the defeated White Wolves: a first appearance at the Olympics. The top three from this continental tournament were all granted automatic spots in Paris. Uzbekistan had never made that stage before, but sealed their 2024 place by beating Indonesia in the semis.

They had won the Under-23 Asian Cup in 2018, not an Olympic year (and the same happened in 2022 when they finished second), and then took fourth in 2020, losing to Australia in the third-place play off for a place in Tokyo. This time, going to Paris was the main target and Uzbekistan were focused on it from the off, scoring 14 goals without reply in the five games to the final.

Once there, they just could not make the breakthrough when it counted. Japan, without really being exciting or dominant, were just a little too smart and solid. Despite a loss to South Korea in the group stage, Samurai Blue got past hosts Qatar in the quarters after extra-time and saw off Iraq in the semis before taking the title for a second time. Go Oiwa's team were tidy and solid but did not quite reach the heights of past Japanese teams. Despite that, they remained composed even when under pressure and that proved to be the difference.

The real story, however, was all about the team that finished fourth. Indonesia had never appeared at the tournament before, but arrived in Qatar with many of the same young players that helped the senior side reach the knockout stage of the Asian Cup for the first time ever in January. They also added naturalised talents from Europe who have Indonesian heritage such as Dutch-born duo Ivar Jenner and Rafael Struick.

After an opening game loss to hosts Qatar, Team Garuda sensationally beat Australia in the second match and then saw off Jordan to earn a quarter-final against South Korea. Indonesia were led by Shin Tae-yong, in charge of the Koreans at the 2018 World Cup, and expected to lose; after all, the Taegeuk Warriors had appeared at every Olympics since 1988 and missing out on Paris was not even thought about.

Yet, Indonesia won. It was a close-run thing. Two hours of football ended 2-2, with the Koreans going down 2-1 and then down to ten men before coming back to earn the draw and then penalties. The shootout ended 11-10 for Shin and the Indonesians. It caused a real shock back in Korea and, after the debacle of the senior Asian Cup under Jurgen Klinsmann in February, has increased the general anger being directed towards the Korea FA. There were mitigating circumstances with the tournament falling outside a FIFA window and coach Hwang Sun-hong (who failed in his audition to become

Review

permanent coach of the senior team) unable to call up European-based players such as Bae Jun-ho at Stoke City and Brentford's Kim Ji-soo.

Australia had similar issues, with coach Tony Vidmar missing a whole host of stars. He did, though, surprise many by not calling up Adelaide United's 18-year-old sensation Nestory Irankunda who is heading to Bayern Munich this summer. Still, there was enough talent to produce a better return than no goals in three games and a loss to Indonesia.

The reactions in Australia and Korea were not Shin's problem – though he said the right things after knocking out his former team. Indonesia, who had not appeared at the Olympics since 1956, had further chances, first in the third-place play-off against Iraq – where they lost 2-1 despite taking the lead – and then in the Asian-African play-off where they went down 1-0 to Guinea.

Third-place play-off... Iraq players celebrate qualifying for Paris

In the third-place play-off, Iraq were helped by the impressive Ali Jasim, already a fully-fledged international, who ended up as the tournament's top scorer with four goals. They were the best West Asian entrants with hosts Qatar and defending champions Saudi Arabia never really getting going and going out at the first knockout stage to an Uzbekistan team that got revenge for 2022 but could not quite go all the way.

CONCACAF

JAMES NALTON

Opportunities abound in World Cup qualifying

CONCACAF's smaller nations have a golden opportunity to seize a spot at the 2026 World Cup ahead of the group stage qualifiers

CONCACAF qualifying for the 2026 World Cup will take on a different feel during this cycle. With the finals set to be co-hosted by Canada, Mexico and the United States, three of the region's leading nations will bypass qualification altogether, opening up huge opportunities for the rest.

Since the United States hosted the World Cup in 1994, the USA and Mexico have only failed to qualify once between them, with the US missing out on Russia 2018. The absence of these two giants, as well as that of CONCACAF 2022 World Cup qualifying table-toppers Canada, leaves an unusual void in the region's tournament this time around, which will be relished by the nations of Central America, the Caribbean and the CONCACAF countries on the northern coast of South America. With three places up for grabs at the finals, plus one in an inter-confederational play-off, there is plenty to play for.

It is a packed and varyingly competitive field. Two first-round games took the field from 32 teams down to 30, deciding the final line-up for this second round, which begins in June.

High hopes ...Costa Rica will be aiming to qualify for their fourth consecutive World Cup

Mr reliable...Jamaica's Bobby Decordova-Reid after scoring against Mexico in the Nations League

Both of those two-legged first-round matches were eventually decided on penalties. Anguilla knocked out the Turks & Caicos Islands while the British Virgin Islands, coached by former Ipswich Town, Arsenal and QPR forward Chris Kiwomya, defeated the US Virgin Islands in what was something of a local derby.

In the second round, the 30 teams will be split into six groups of five in which they play each other once. The highest FIFA-ranked teams in each group have the advantage of playing the two teams closest to them in the rankings at home. This in turn means that the lowest-ranked team in each group will face the two highest-ranked teams in their home games.

With three places up for grabs at the World Cup finals, plus one in an inter-confederational play-off, there is plenty to play for

Hat-trick hero...Panama's Ismael Diaz scores against Qatar at the Gold Cup

Those 30 teams will then be whittled down to 12 as two from each group qualify for the third round. There, the eventual World Cup qualifiers will be decided among three groups of four playing each other home and away, with the top team from each group securing their place.

But before then, there is this wide-ranging, far-reaching stage to contend with.

After Mexico and the United States, Costa Rica are the CONCACAF nation to have appeared at the most World Cups with six, including the last three.

They will be expecting to keep that run going by qualifying again this time around and, as a team seeded in pot one, should win their second-round group. They have been drawn in the same pool (Group B) as one of the highest-ranked teams from pot two, Trinidad & Tobago, and in most of these groups, the teams from those two pots will expect to progress.

Guatemala (Group E) have never qualified for a World Cup and will be looking back on some good results in the group stage of the 2023 Gold Cup to remind themselves that they are among the best teams in Central America.

Just one ranking place separates Haiti and Curacao, both drawn in Group C from pots one and two respectively, while El Salvador (Group F) and Honduras (Group A) will expect to navigate this stage with minimal fuss.

Jamaica (Group E) and Panama (Group D) will be looking to confirm their status as the best teams in CONCACAF not already qualified for the World Cup. The Reggae Boyz in particular can boast several star names, depending on which of them join up with the squad at any given time. Fulham's Bobby Decordova-Reid may not be the most high profile of them but he has been one of the most reliable, missing only one game of the Nations League campaign and scoring three goals.

Panama, meanwhile, will be looking to Ismael Diaz to rediscover the form that saw him score a hat-trick against Qatar in the Gold Cup quarter-final. The 27-year-old winger has not scored for his country since then, but has found the net regularly in the Copa Sudamericana for his club side Universidad Catolica of Ecuador.

THE DRAW

GROUP A
- Honduras
- Antigua & Barbuda
- Cuba
- Bermuda
- Cayman Islands

GROUP B
- Costa Rica
- Trinidad & Tobago
- St Kitts & Nevis
- Grenada
- Bahamas

GROUP C
- Haiti
- Curacao
- St Lucia
- Barbados
- Aruba

GROUP D
- Panama
- Nicaragua
- Guyana
- Montserrat
- Belize

GROUP E
- Jamaica
- Guatemala
- Dominican Republic
- Dominica
- British Virgin Islands

GROUP F
- El Salvador
- Suriname
- Puerto Rico
- St Vincent & Grenadines
- Anguilla

Vanuatu & Fiji

STEVE MENARY

OFC Nations Cup ready to return

Oceania's continental championship set to be played across two venues

Preview

Co-hosts... Vanuatu players during March's FIFA Series

In over 50 years, just 11 editions of the OFC Nations Cup have been staged and this year's event will be the first since 2016.

Oceania's premier international tournament was first held in 1973, but struggled to become a regular event and all the early titles were won by either New Zealand or Australia. In 2004, the tournament became quadrennial and that was the last edition won by Australia, who joined the Asian Football Confederation two years later.

Tahiti were shock winners in 2012 and qualified for the FIFA Confederations Cup the following year, but normal service resumed in 2016 with New Zealand edging past Papua New Guinea on penalties after a goalless draw.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the cancellation of the 2020 event, which was due to be staged in New Zealand, but after an eight-year hiatus the Nations Cup will kick-off on June 15 and feature eight teams across two venues – Port Vila in Vanuatu, and the Fijian capital of Suva.

Seven were given places in the finals with Samoa emerging successfully from a one-off qualification tournament held in Tonga in March that also featured the hosts and the Cook Islands. The OFC's other full member, American Samoa, did not enter, preferring to prioritise the region's World Cup qualifiers later this year under new coach David Jones.

With the OFC staging 11 competitions and 16 events this year, including the

start of the 2026 World Cup qualifiers in early September, resources may be stretched for a number of contenders. With the winners no longer qualifying for the defunct Confederations Cup, the competition has lost some lustre and holders New Zealand – facing their busiest international calendar in two decades – initially considered not defending their title before subsequently relenting. Darren Bazeley's side will be favourites, but they will face some stiff competition.

The finals were originally set to take place in an official FIFA window but got moved to their own international window (like the Euros), and as a result New Zealand will be without star man Chris Wood – fresh from scoring 14 Premier League goals for Nottingham Forest – due to a date clash with his wedding.

The All Whites also face the tougher of the two groups. Home support boosted Vanuatu's representatives in a run to the semi-finals of last year's OFC Champions League, and the national team gained valuable experience after taking part in the recent inaugural round of the FIFA Series. A 6-0 trouncing from Guinea was followed by a 3-2 loss to Brunei and Emerson Alcantara's side will be outsiders in Group A.

The second semi-final spot behind likely winners New Zealand should be contested by New Caledonia and the Solomon Islands. The French collective were runners-up in 2008 and 2012, while the Solomon Islands' sole appearance in the final was two decades ago, but star striker Raphael Lea'i will be keen to impress after a spell in Europe with Bosnia & Herzegovina's Velez Mostar did not work out quite as planned.

Group B will be played in the Fijian capital of Suva and, with home advantage and a reliable goalscorer, the co-hosts should be confident of making the trip across to Port Vila for the semi-finals.

Fiji talisman... Roy Krishna

Fiji's best performance was third in 1998 and again a decade later, and coach Rob Sherman's side will have a good shot at the semi-finals. Talismanic veteran striker Roy Krishna, whose 36 goals in 52 games is a national record, will lead the team. Sherman also expects to include Scott Wara, who plays in the UK for non-league side Stalybridge Celtic, plus some New Zealand based players and says: "We will be competitive."

After an eight-year hiatus the Nations Cup will kick-off on June 15 and feature eight teams across two venues – Port Vila in Vanuatu, and the Fijian capital of Suva

Samoa – also led by a UK-born coach, the Northern Irishman Ryan Stewart – will be outsiders, so the other two sides will likely be competing to join Fiji in the top two.

With 27 goals in 40 games, Teaonui Tehau is Tahiti's equivalent of Krishna, but five years younger and the only remaining member of Tahiti's 2012 title-winning side, which was a golden generation, many of whom were brought through from youth football by then-coach Eddy Etaeta. Tahiti will also call on overseas-based players, as will the other contenders in Group B, Papua New Guinea. Warren Moon's side also took part in the FIFA Series, which was their first-ever tournament outside Oceania. Hosts Sri Lanka were held to a goalless draw before a 4-0 defeat to a strong Central African Republic side.

Moon hopes to call up three Australian-based players – Tommy Semmy, Raymond Diho and Leenard Afterell – and still harbours ambitions of getting David Browne involved, despite the Finnish-based striker not playing for 18 months due to an injury. "We're certainly not favourites, but with our strongest team out we can cause some problems," says Moon, who was previously coach at Brisbane Roar.

New Zealand are the only team to appear in the ten previous editions and the likelihood is they will make the final in June, but their opponents could be one from half a dozen other sides.

Holders and big favourites ...New Zealand

DRAW & FIXTURES

GROUP A

- New Zealand
- Solomon Islands
- Vanuatu
- New Caledonia

Jun 15: New Zealand v New Caledonia; Solomon Islands v Vanuatu
Jun 18: New Zealand v Solomon Islands; Vanuatu v New Caledonia
Jun 21: New Caledonia v Solomon Islands; Vanuatu v New Zealand

GROUP B

- Fiji
- Papua New Guinea
- Samoa
- Tahiti

Jun 16: Tahiti v Samoa; PNG v Fiji
Jun 19: Samoa v Fiji; PNG v Tahiti
Jun 22: Fiji v Tahiti; Samoa v PNG

Nauru

STEVE MENARY

Football's final frontier

Nauru is one of the last officially recognised countries in the world to have never played a football international, but not for long

Nauru Linkbelt Oval...the island's only sports field

Measuring just 21 square kilometres, only the Vatican and Monaco are smaller than Nauru, which has a population of around 10,000 that mainly plays Australian Rules football and rugby league. But that is set to change since the formation of the Nauru Soccer Federation (NSF) and with Kaz Cain installed as president.

The catalyst for the NSF's emergence lies in a meeting in 2019 between Cain and Gareth Johnson, an English travel agent based in Cambodia who runs Young Pioneer Tours.

"We run a least visited countries trip that started in 2017 and top of that list was Nauru," explains Johnson. "Everything in the Pacific needs to be done face to face and I met Kaz in 2019. Then COVID struck. We met again in January [2024] and he's given me the opportunity to promote this."

That meeting led to the appointment as coach of Charlie Pomroy, an English coach based in Cambodia, where he was previously in charge of Keisuke Honda's local side, Soltilo Angkor. Now running his own club there, Angkor City FC, Pomroy says: "They've beaten a number of other countries at Aussie Rules. That leads me to believe there are athletes there that can run, throw and kick.

"The most important thing is not to go there as white saviours. We want to develop a Nauru style of play. It's about getting a team on the field."

To raise money, the NSF has agreed a deal with shirt supplier Stingz and Hong Kong-based fashion brand Giordano, which will produce Nauru soccer gear. In March 2024, former Reading striker Dave Kitson agreed to be national team manager and will go to Nauru in July with Pomroy for a training camp with a view to playing a game in August.

Nauru's only field is the Linkbelt Oval, which hosts Aussie Rules and rugby. A new stadium is due to be built for 2026, when Nauru will host the Micronesian Games, so the first fixture is likely to be away.

A more pressing concern is players, but Leicester City academy coach Sam Bennett has offered to help scour the diaspora for eligible players having previously done the same for Samoa.

Johnson adds: "It's quite a small playing pool, you can't get away from that. But a lot of the guys that play Aussie Rules and rugby have agreed to come and give it a try. American Samoa have asked us to come and play. I know why, because they will win, but they have offered accommodation and we now need to raise the money for a flight."

A full member of FIFA but a Pacific minnow, American Samoa is planning a tournament with three other sides but Pago Pago is 3,000km away and involves flying via Fiji. If that does not materialise, Johnson is in touch with the football association in Kiribati, which is just 708km away, also willing to host, and connected directly.

> "We want to develop a Nauru style of play"
>
> Nauru coach Charlie Pomroy

Nauru's first national team manager... Dave Kitson

The Kiribati Islands Football Association is an associate member of the Oceania Football Confederation, but has been struggling to secure full membership for years. Ultimately, the NSF want to try the same route but the short-term target is simpler: "If we don't play a game this year, then we will have failed," says Johnson.

JUNE 7-JULY 5

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

Tournament warm-ups

There is still time for some last-minute friendlies for those teams preparing for this summer's major tournaments in Europe and South America.

Canada have opted to ready themselves for the Copa America with a trip to Europe, lining up friendlies against the Netherlands in Rotterdam before travelling to Bordeaux to face France, while the United States will take on South American opposition in the shape of Colombia and Brazil. The Brazilians will also face Mexico in Texas as part of their Copa preparations.

Elsewhere, Germany's final game before hosting the Euros will be against Greece, Portugal will take on Croatia and Republic of Ireland, Spain play Northern Ireland, while England and Scotland's preparations conclude at home against Iceland and Finland respectively.

European tour... Canada will head across the Atlantic before the Copa America

2026 World Cup qualifying

While Europe and South America prepare for major tournaments, the road to the 2026 World Cup continues in Africa, Asia and CONCACAF.

In Asia, the second-round group stage will conclude. With many of the big guns – Qatar, Japan, Iran, Uzbekistan, Iraq, United Arab Emirates and Australia – already safely into the next stage, focus turns to the likes of Asian Cup finalists Jordan, who can advance by beating Tajikistan, and Palestine, who can secure their place with a point against Lebanon.

The road to 2026...Palestine players celebrate a goal in the 5-0 thrashing of Bangladesh in March

Africa's group stage is still in its infancy, with only two rounds of the ten matchdays played so far. But, with World Cup qualifying not resuming again until March 2025, the upcoming fixtures will be key, particularly for slow starters like Ghana and Nigeria.

In CONCACAF World Cup qualifying (more on page 88), the first of two group-stage rounds kick off. Jamaica, Panama and Costa Rica will expect to take maximum points from their two upcoming games, although all three will also be keen to avoid any injuries before the Copa America.

Baltic Cup

With none of the three Baltic countries – Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia – competing at this summer's European Championship, they will instead take part in the Baltic Cup, one of the oldest international football tournaments in the world, first played in 1928. This year – the cup's 30th edition – the Faroe Islands will also compete in the biennial tournament, facing Estonia in the semi-final on June 8 while Latvia take on Lithuania. The final is on June 10.

5 unmissable matches

- **Germany v Scotland, June 14**
  As if you needed reminding: Euro 2024 begins on Friday, June 14 at 8pm, with Steve Clarke's Scotland hoping to upset the hosts' party in Munich.

Allianz Arena...the opening night host stadium

- **Spain v Italy, June 20**
  With five European crowns between them, this will be the heavyweight clash of the group stage, and the fifth consecutive Euros the two have met in.

- **Argentina v Canada, June 20**
  The Copa America begins here, and it is difficult to imagine a harder first competitive test for new Canada head coach Jesse Marsch than a game against the world champions.

- **Netherlands v Austria, June 25**
  Widely tipped as Euros dark horses, Ralf Rangnick's Austria could bring Dutch dreams to an early end in this game, the final match of Group D.

- **USA v Uruguay, July 1**
  With the United States' crop of energetic young players and Marcelo Bielsa's commitment to high-pressing football, this could be one of the games of the Copa group stage.

Uruguay boss... Marcelo Bielsa

Spanish promotion play-offs

La Liga will be the last of Europe's top five leagues to know its full complement of teams for the 2024-25 campaign, with the Segunda Division's promotion play-offs taking place in June. At the time of writing, with two games of the season remaining, all of the division's top 11 clubs had a chance of competing in the play-offs, which are contested between four teams and includes a two-legged final.

Club Football

EUROPE

2023-24 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 9 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 2 (Saka 12, Trossard 76)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 (Gnabry 18, Kane 32 pen)

Apr 9 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 3 (Dias 12 og, Rodrygo 14, Valverde 79)
Manchester City (Eng) 3 (B. Silva 2, Foden 66, Gvardiol 71)

Apr 10 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 2 (De Paul 4, Lino 32)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 1 (Haller 81)

Apr 10 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 2 (Dembele 48, 51)
Barcelona (Spa) 3 (Raphinha 37, 62, Christensen 77)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 16 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 4 (Brandt 34, Maatsen 39, Fullkrug 71, Sabitzer 74)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 2 (Hummels 49 og, Correa 64)
Borussia Dortmund win 5-4 on aggregate

Apr 16 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 1 (Raphinha 12)
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 4 (Dembele 40, Vitinha 54, Mbappe 61 pen, 89)
Paris Saint-Germain win 6-4 on aggregate

Apr 17 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 1 (Kimmich 63)
Arsenal (Eng) 0
Bayern Munich win 3-2 on aggregate

Apr 17 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 1 (De Bruyne 76)
Real Madrid (Spa) 1 (Rodrygo 12)
After Extra-Time. 4-4 on aggregate
Real Madrid win 4-3 on penalties

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 30 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 (Sane 53, Kane 57 pen)
Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Vinicius Junior 24, 83 pen)

May 1 – Dortmund
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 1 (Fullkrug 36)
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

May 7 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 0
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 1 (Hummels 50)
Borussia Dortmund win 2-0 on aggregate

May 8 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Joselu 88, 90+1)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 1 (Davies 68)
Real Madrid win 4-3 on aggregate

2023-24 EUROPA LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 11 – Milan
Milan (Ita) 0
Roma (Ita) 1 (Mancini 17)

Apr 11 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 0
Atalanta (Ita) 3 (Scamacca 38, 60, Pasalic 83)

Apr 11 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Hofmann 83, Boniface 90+1)
West Ham United (Eng) 0

Apr 11 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 2 (R. Silva 16, Di Maria 52)
Marseille (Fra) 1 (Aubameyang 67)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 18 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 2 (Mancini 12, Dybala 22)
Milan (Ita) 1 (Gabbia 85)
Roma win 3-1 on aggregate

Apr 18 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 0
Liverpool (Eng) 1 (Salah 7 pen)
Atalanta win 3-1 on aggregate

Apr 18 – London
West Ham United (Eng) 1 (Antonio 13)
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 1 (Frimpong 89)
Bayer Leverkusen win 3-1 on aggregate

Apr 18 – Marseille
Marseille (Fra) 1 (Moumbagna 79)
Benfica (Por) 0
After Extra-Time. 2-2 on aggregate
Marseille win 4-2 on penalties

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

May 2 – Marseille
Marseille (Fra) 1 (Mbemba 20)
Atalanta (Ita) 1 (Scamacca 11)

May 2 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 0
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Wirtz 28, Andrich 73)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

May 9 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 3 (Lookman 30, Ruggeri 52, Toure 90+5)
Marseille (Fra) 0
Atalanta win 4-1 on aggregate

May 9 – Leverkusen
Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Mancini 82 og, Stanisic 90+7)
Roma (Ita) 2 (Paredes 43 pen, 66 pen)
Bayer Leverkusen win 4-2 on aggregate

2023-24 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 11 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 1 (Vetlesen 6)
PAOK (Gre) 0

Apr 11 – Piraeus
Olympiakos (Gre) 3 (Fortounis 8, Jovetic 32, Chiquinho 57)
Fenerbahce (Tur) 2 (Tadic 68 pen, Kahveci 74)

Apr 11 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 2 (Watkins 13, McGinn 56)
Lille (Fra) 1 (Diakite 84)

Apr 11 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 0
Fiorentina (Ita) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 18 – Thessaloniki
PAOK (Gre) 0
Club Brugge (Bel) 2 (Jutgla 33, 45)
Club Brugge win 3-1 on aggregate

Apr 18 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 1 (Kahveci 11)
Olympiakos (Gre) 0
After Extra-Time. 3-3 on aggregate
Olympiakos win 3-2 on penalties

Apr 18 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 2 (Yazici 15, Andre 68)
Aston Villa (Eng) 1 (Cash 87)
After Extra-Time. 3-3 on aggregate
Aston Villa win 4-3 on penalties

Apr 18 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 2 (Gonzalez 92, Biraghi 108)
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 0
AET. Fiorentina win 2-0 on aggregate

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

May 2 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 2 (Watkins 45+1, Diaby 52)
Olympiakos (Gre) 4 (El Kaabi 16, 29, 56 pen, Hezze 67)

May 2 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 3 (Sottil 5, Belotti 37, Nzola 90+1)
Club Brugge (Bel) 2 (Vanaken 17 pen, Thiago 63)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

May 8 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 1 (Vanaken 20)
Fiorentina (Ita) 1 (Beltran 85 pen)
Fiorentina win 4-3 on aggregate

May 9 – Piraeus
Olympiakos (Gre) 2 (El Kaabi 10, 78)
Aston Villa (Eng) 0
Olympiakos win 6-2 on aggregate

2023-24 COPPA ITALIA

Final

May 15 – Rome
Atalanta 0
Juventus 1 (Vlahovic 4)

2023-24 COPA DEL REY

Final

Apr 6 – Seville
Athletic Club 1 (Sancet 50)
Mallorca 1 (Rodriguez 21)
After Extra-Time. Athletic Club win 4-2 on pens

2023-24 KNVB DUTCH CUP

Final

Apr 21 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord 1 (Paixao 56)
NEC Nijmegen 0

SOUTH AMERICA

2024 COPA LIBERTADORES

Group A

Apr 3 – Santiago
Colo-Colo (Chi) 1 (Cepeda 90+4)
Cerro Porteno (Par) 0

Apr 3 – Lima
Alianza Lima (Per) 1 (Serna 35)
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (Marquinhos 72)

Apr 9 – Rio de Janeiro
Fluminense (Bra) 2 (Marquinhos 5, Cano 52)
Colo-Colo (Chi) 1 (Paiva 19)

Apr 10 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Carrizo 90+6)
Alianza Lima (Per) 0

Apr 23 – Santiago
Colo-Colo (Chi) 0
Alianza Lima (Per) 0

Apr 25 – Asuncion
Cerro Porteno (Par) 0
Fluminense (Bra) 0

May 8 – Lima
Alianza Lima (Per) 1 (Barcos 80)
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Iturbe 26)

May 9 – Santiago
Colo-Colo (Chi) 0
Fluminense (Bra) 1 (Manoel 74)

May 15 – Lima
Alianza Lima (Per) 1 (Barcos 42)
Colo-Colo (Chi) 1 (Vidal 78)

May 16 – Rio de Janeiro
Fluminense (Bra) 2 (Marcelo 14, Ganso 74)
Cerro Porteno (Par) 1 (Viera 19)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fluminense	5	3	2	0	6	3	11
Cerro Porteno	5	1	2	2	3	4	5
Colo-Colo	5	1	2	2	3	4	5
Alianza Lima	5	0	4	1	3	4	4

Group B

Apr 2 – Calama
Cobresal (Chi) 1 (Valencia 90+1 pen)
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 1 (Fydriszewski 52 pen)

Apr 4 – Cordoba
Talleres (Arg) 2 (Ruiz Rodriguez 45+6, Botta 53)
Sao Paulo (Bra) 1 (Luciano 66)

Apr 10 – Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo (Bra) 2 (Andre Silva 82, Calleri 88)
Cobresal (Chi) 0

Apr 10 – Guayaquil
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 2 (Diaz 28, 57 pen)
Talleres (Arg) 2 (Girotti 45, Rodriguez 90+6)

Apr 25 – Calama
Cobresal (Chi) 0
Talleres (Arg) 2 (Mantilla 19, Sosa 28)

Apr 25 – Guayaquil
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 0
Sao Paulo (Bra) 2 (Calleri 17, Alisson 64)

May 8 – Cordoba
Talleres (Arg) 3 (Catalan 12, Botta 25, Bou 90+4)
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 1 (Rojas 61)

May 8 – Calama
Cobresal (Chi) 1 (Coelho 23)
Sao Paulo (Bra) 3 (Luciano 38, Rodrigo Nestor 60, Calleri 78)

May 14 – Cordoba
Talleres (Arg) 1 (Girotti 82)
Cobresal (Chi) 0

May 16 – Sao Paulo
Sao Paulo (Bra) 0
Barcelona SC (Ecu) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Talleres	5	4	1	0	10	4	13
Sao Paulo	5	3	1	1	8	3	10
Barcelona SC	5	0	3	2	4	8	3
Cobresal	5	0	1	4	2	9	1

Group C

Apr 2 – La Paz
The Strongest (Bol) 2 (Ursino 16, Triverio 73)
Gremio (Bra) 0

Apr 3 – Talcahuano
Huachipato (Chi) 1 (C. Martinez 81)
Estudiantes (Arg) 1 (Correa 42)

Apr 9 – La Plata
Estudiantes (Arg) 2 (Carrillo 65, Cetre 81)
The Strongest (Bol) 1 (Triverio 21)

Apr 9 – Porto Alegre
Gremio (Bra) 0
Huachipato (Chi) 2 (Loyola 13, Montes 45+6)

Apr 23 – La Plata
Estudiantes (Arg) 0
Gremio (Bra) 1 (Nathan Fernandes 75)

Apr 24 – Talcahuano
Huachipato (Chi) 0
The Strongest (Bol) 0

May 9 – La Paz
The Strongest (Bol) 1 (Ursino 13)
Estudiantes (Arg) 0

May 15 – La Paz
The Strongest (Bol) 4 (Ramallo 35, Ortega 61, Quiroga 71, Angulo 90+1 pen)
Huachipato (Chi) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
The Strongest	5	3	1	1	8	2	10
Huachipato	4	1	2	1	3	5	5
Estudiantes	4	1	1	2	3	4	4
Gremio	3	1	0	2	1	4	3

Group D

Apr 2 – Lima
Universitario (Per) 2 (Rivera 50, 70)
LDU (Ecu) 1 (Quinonez 29)

Apr 3 – Rio de Janeiro
Botafogo (Bra) 1 (Hugo 43)
Junior (Col) 3 (Bacca 13 pen, 41, Fuentes 28)

Apr 9 – Barranquilla
Junior (Col) 1 (Caicedo 44)
Universitario (Per) 1 (Corzo 22)

Apr 11 – Quito
LDU (Ecu) 1 (Alzugaray 4)
Botafogo (Bra) 0

Apr 23 – Barranquilla
Junior (Col) 1 (Bacca 12 pen)
LDU (Ecu) 1 (Arce 45 pen)

Apr 24 – Rio de Janeiro
Botafogo (Bra) 3 (Carlos Eduardo 47, 90+2, Luiz Henrique 57)
Universitario (Per) 1 (Olivares 90+4)

May 7 – Lima
Universitario (Per) 1 (Flores 24)
Junior (Col) 1 (Castrillon 5)

May 8 – Rio de Janeiro
Botafogo (Bra) 2 (Hugo 31, Junior Santos 69)
LDU (Ecu) 1 (Estrada 45+1)

May 14 – Quito
LDU (Ecu) 0
Junior (Col) 1 (Enamorado 37)

May 16 – Lima
Universitario (Per) 0
Botafogo (Bra) 1 (Jeffinho 77)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Junior	5	2	3	0	7	4	9
Botafogo	5	3	0	2	7	6	9
Universitario	5	1	2	2	5	7	5
LDU	5	1	1	3	4	6	4

Group E

Apr 2 – Bogota
Millonarios (Col) 1 (Ruiz 80)
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (Pedro 64 pen)

Apr 4 – Coquimbo
Palestino (Chi) 0
Bolivar (Bol) 4 (Da Costa 27 pen, 34, Bruno Savio 63, R. Vaca 83)

Apr 10 – Rio de Janeiro
Flamengo (Bra) 2 (Pedro 21, Leo Ortiz 85)
Palestino (Chi) 0

Apr 11 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 3 (Jo. Sagredo 3, Da Costa 10, Bruno Savio 34)
Millonarios (Col) 2 (L. Castro 45+1, 72 pen)

Apr 24 – La Paz
Bolivar (Bol) 2 (Da Costa 2, Bruno Savio 62)
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (Vina 5)

Apr 25 – Coquimbo
Palestino (Chi) 3 (Chamorro 19, 42, Vejar 75)
Millonarios (Col) 1 (L. Castro 32)

May 7 – Coquimbo
Palestino (Chi) 1 (Cornejo 63)
Flamengo (Bra) 0

May 8 – Bogota
Millonarios (Col) 1 (Llinas 43)
Bolivar (Bol) 1 (R. Vaca 67)

May 14 – Bogota
Millonarios (Col) 1 (Carvajal 40)
Palestino (Chi) 1 (Marabel 90+2)

May 15 – Rio de Janeiro
Flamengo (Bra) 4 (Gerson 1, Ayrton Lucas 38, Everton 43, Pedro 56)
Bolivar (Bol) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bolivar	5	3	1	1	10	8	10
Flamengo	5	2	1	2	8	4	7
Palestino	5	2	1	2	5	8	7
Millonarios	5	0	3	2	6	9	3

Group F

Apr 3 – Buenos Aires
San Lorenzo (Arg) 1 (Romana 20)
Palmeiras (Bra) 1 (Piquerez 81)

Apr 4 – Montevideo
Liverpool (Uru) 1 (L. Rodriguez 79)
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 1 (Ortiz 8)

Apr 10 – Quito
Ind. del Valle (Ecu) 2 (Sornoza 13 pen, Hoyos 45+1)
San Lorenzo (Arg) 0

Apr 11 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 3 (Moreno 45+5, Lopez 58, Estevao 66)
Liverpool (Uru) 1 (Rosso 3)

Apr 23 – Montevideo
Liverpool (Uru) 1 (Nicola 90+5)
San Lorenzo (Arg) 0

Apr 24 – Quito
Ind. del Valle (Ecu) 2 (Paez 12, Hoyos 38)
Palmeiras (Bra) 3 (Endrick 45+2, Lazaro 81, Luis Guilherme 90+5)

May 9 – Buenos Aires
San Lorenzo (Arg) 2 (Cuello 16, Bareiro 24)
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 0

May 9 – Montevideo
Liverpool (Uru) 0
Palmeiras (Bra) 5 (Veiga 44, 71, Endrick 82, Rony 90+1, Gomez 90+6 pen)

May 15 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 2 (Rios 36, Gomez 45+3 pen)
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 1 (Diaz 64)

May 16 – Buenos Aires
San Lorenzo (Arg) 3 (Leguizamon 5, Cuello 45+5, Campi 87)
Liverpool (Uru) 2 (Garcia 24, L. Rodriguez 62)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Palmeiras	5	4	1	0	14	5	13
San Lorenzo	5	2	1	2	6	6	7
Ind. del Valle	5	1	1	3	6	8	4
Liverpool	5	1	1	3	5	12	4

Group G

Apr 4 – Caracas
Caracas (Ven) 1 (Perez 54)
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 4 (Bruno Fuchs 12, Guilherme Arana 32, Paulinho 44, 70)

Apr 4 – Rosario
Rosario Central (Arg) 1 (Quintana 45+1)
Penarol (Uru) 0

Apr 10 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 2 (Scarpa 39, Paulinho 77)
Rosario Central (Arg) 1 (Malcorra 74)

Apr 10 – Montevideo
Penarol (Uru) 5 (Silvera 16, 25, 64, Mendez 32, Darias 45)
Caracas (Ven) 0

Apr 23 – Caracas
Caracas (Ven) 1 (Pernia 25)
Rosario Central (Arg) 1 (Modica 67)

Apr 23 – Belo Horizonte
Atl. Mineiro (Bra) 3 (Scarpa 15, 57, Paulinho 26)
Rosario Central (Arg) 2 (Olivera 60, Silvera 68)

May 7 – Rosario
Rosario Central (Arg) 0
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 1 (Paulinho 87)

May 7 – Caracas
Caracas (Ven) 0
Penarol (Uru) 1 (Rodriguez 26)

May 14 – Montevideo
Penarol (Uru) 2 (Hernandez 70, Silvera 76)
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 0

May 16 – Rosario
Rosario Central (Arg) 4 (Lovera 29, Modica 33, 57, Lo Celso 90+1)
Caracas (Ven) 1 (Echenique 85)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Atletico Mineiro	5	4	0	1	10	6	12
Penarol	5	3	0	2	10	4	9
Rosario Central	5	2	1	2	7	5	7
Caracas	5	0	1	4	3	15	1

Group H

Apr 2 – San Cristobal
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 0
River Plate (Arg) 2 (Boselli 72, Fonseca 79)

Apr 3 – Montevideo
Nacional (Uru) 2 (Lozano 32, Bentancourt 62)
Libertad (Par) 0

Apr 9 – Asuncion
Libertad (Par) 3 (Sanabria 32, Melgarejo 39, Aguilar 78)
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 0

Apr 11 – Buenos Aires
River Plate (Arg) 2 (Echeverri 15, Colidio 90+3)
Nacional (Uru) 0

Apr 24 – Montevideo
Nacional (Uru) 2 (Castro 14, Recoba 21)
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 1 (Ruiz Diaz 30)

Apr 24 – Asuncion
Libertad (Par) 1 (Espinoza 40)
River Plate (Arg) 2 (Solari 34, Mastantuono 80)

May 7 – San Cristobal
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 1 (J. Hernandez 31)
Libertad (Par) 1 (Santa Cruz 50)

May 7 – Montevideo
Nacional (Uru) 2 (Carneiro 78 pen, 79)
River Plate (Arg) 2 (Borja 8, Colidio 30)

May 14 – Buenos Aires
River Plate (Arg) 2 (Borja 41, 84)
Libertad (Par) 0

May 15 – San Cristobal
Deportivo Tachira (Ven) 0
Nacional (Uru) 1 (Castro 53)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
River Plate	5	4	1	0	10	3	13
Nacional	5	3	1	1	7	5	10
Libertad	5	1	1	3	5	7	4
Dep. Tachira	5	0	1	4	2	9	1

2024 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Group A

Apr 2 – Trujillo
Universidad Cesar Vallejo (Per) 0
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 1 (Zapata 59)

Apr 4 – El Alto
Always Ready (Bol) 2 (Tanque 45, Lima 55 og)
Independiente Medellin (Col) 0

Apr 10 – Gobernador Costa
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 1 (Fernandez 30)
Always Ready (Bol) 1 (Terrazas 73)

Apr 10 – Medellin
Independiente Medellin (Col) 4 (Vasquez 12, 23 pen, Leon 48, Garcia 79)
Universidad Cesar Vallejo (Per) 2 (Mena 63, Velez 76 pen)

Apr 25 – El Alto
Always Ready (Bol) 2 (Cuellar 15, Martines 90)
Universidad Cesar Vallejo (Per) 0

Apr 25 – Medellin
Ind. Medellin (Col) 2 (Leon 1, Monsalve 22)
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 1 (Palavecino 76)

May 7 – Trujillo
Universidad Cesar Vallejo (Per) 1 (Velez 21)
Independiente Medellin (Col) 5 (Leon 15, 45, Garcia 59, Monsalve 73, Perlaza 79)

May 7 – El Alto
Always Ready (Bol) 3 (Rodrigues 11, Tanque 47, Cuellar 50)
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 0

May 14 – Gobernador Costa
Defensa y Justicia (Arg) 1 (Ortiz 68 og)
Independiente Medellin (Col) 1 (Leon 22)

May 15 – Trujillo
Universidad Cesar Vallejo (Per) 2 (Mena 17, Deneumostier 74)
Always Ready (Bol) 2 (Caicedo 29, Tanque 54)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Always Ready	5	3	2	0	10	3	11
Ind. Medellin	5	3	1	1	12	7	10
Defensa y Justicia	5	1	2	2	4	7	5
U. Cesar Vallejo	5	0	1	4	5	14	1

Group B

Apr 3 – Valledupar
Alianza (Col) 0
Union La Calera (Chi) 1 (Gigliotti 45+3 pen)

Apr 4 – Quito
Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 0
Cruzeiro (Bra) 0

Apr 10 – Valparaiso
Union La Calera (Chi) 0
Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 1 (I. Diaz 61)

Apr 11 – Belo Horizonte
Cruzeiro (Bra) 3 (Romero 7, Ze Ivaldo 12, Matheus Pereira 19)
Alianza (Col) 3 (Batalla 53, 79, Figueroa 90+6)

Apr 23 – Concepcion
Union La Calera (Chi) 0
Cruzeiro (Bra) 0

Apr 23 – Valledupar
Alianza (Col) 1 (Batalla 8)
Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 3 (Franco 56 og, Cifuente 68, I. Diaz 78)

May 7 – Valledupar
Alianza (Col) 0
Cruzeiro (Bra) 3 (Lucas Silva 41, Arthur Gomes 49, Rafael Elias 90+3)

May 9 – Quito
Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 4 (Fajardo 3, 45+1, I. Diaz 49, Cifuente 75)
Union La Calera (Chi) 0

May 16 – Belo Horizonte
Cruzeiro (Bra) 1 (Matheus Pereira 7)
Union La Calera (Chi) 0

May 16 – Quito
Universidad Catolica (Ecu) 0
Alianza (Col) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
U. Catolica	5	3	2	0	8	1	11
Cruzeiro	5	2	3	0	7	3	9
Union La Calera	5	1	1	3	1	6	4
Alianza	5	0	2	3	4	10	2

Group C

Apr 2 – Cordoba
Belgrano (Arg) 0
Internacional (Bra) 0

Apr 4 – Tarija
Real Tomayapo (Bol) 0
Delfin (Ecu) 2 (Angulo 52 pen, Gariglio 74)

Apr 10 – Porto Alegre
Internacional (Bra) 0
Real Tomayapo (Bol) 0

Apr 11 – Manta
Delfin (Ecu) 1 (Elordi 90+1)
Belgrano (Arg) 1 (Jara 42)

Apr 24 – Santa Cruz de la Sierra
Real Tomayapo (Bol) 0
Belgrano (Arg) 2 (Lencioni 17, Marin 83)

Apr 25 – Manta
Delfin (Ecu) 1 (Castro 53)
Internacional (Bra) 2 (Wesley 35, Borre 52 pen)

May 9 – Cordoba
Belgrano (Arg) 1 (Jara 62)
Delfin (Ecu) 1 (Angulo 64)

May 15 – Cordoba
Belgrano (Arg) 1 (Velazquez 14)
Real Tomayapo (Bol) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Belgrano	5	2	3	0	5	2	9
Delfin	4	1	2	1	5	4	5
Internacional	3	1	2	0	2	1	5
Real Tomayapo	4	0	1	3	0	5	1

Group D

Apr 3 – Asuncion
Sportivo Trinidense (Par) 0
Fortaleza (Bra) 2 (Thiago Galhardo 4, Yago Pikachu 90+2)

Apr 3 – Potosi
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 0
Boca Juniors (Arg) 0

Apr 9 – Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors (Arg) 1 (Anselmino 71)
Sportivo Trinidense (Par) 0

Apr 10 – Fortaleza
Fortaleza (Bra) 5 (Hercules 13, Lucero 16, 29, Yago Pikachu 48, Machuca 58)
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 0

Apr 23 – Asuncion
Sportivo Trinidense (Par) 2 (Romero 15, Salcedo 62)
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 0

Apr 25 – Fortaleza
Fortaleza (Bra) 4 (Lucero 4, 51, Yago Pikachu 55, 63)
Boca Juniors (Arg) 2 (Merentiel 21, Zenon 85)

May 8 – Potosi
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 4 (Callejo 6, Prost 37, Guerra 70, Alvarez 90+3)
Fortaleza (Bra) 1 (Lucero 16)

May 8 – Asuncion
Sportivo Trinidense (Par) 1 (Andrada 44)
Boca Juniors (Arg) 2 (Figal 69, Cavani 90+2)

May 14 – Potosi
Nacional Potosi (Bol) 2 (Galindo 68, Alvarez 90+2)
Sportivo Trinidense (Par) 1 (Pereira 29)

May 15 – Buenos Aires
Boca Juniors (Arg) 1 (Cavani 55)
Fortaleza (Bra) 1 (Andrade 90)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fortaleza	5	3	1	1	13	7	10
Boca Juniors	5	2	2	1	6	6	8
Nacional Potosi	5	2	1	2	6	9	7
S. Trinidense	5	1	0	4	4	7	3

Group E

Apr 2 – Asuncion
Sportivo Ameliano (Par) 1 (Vera 15)
Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 4 (Mastriani 6, 73, Zapelli 32, Fernandinho 45+2)

Apr 3 – Caracas
Rayo Zuliano (Ven) 0
Danubio (Uru) 2 (Bueno 78, Fernandez 90+3)

Apr 9 – Montevideo
Danubio (Uru) 0
Sportivo Ameliano (Par) 0

Apr 9 – Curitiba
Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 6 (Fernandinho 15 pen, Esquivel 23, Canobbio 27, 76, Pablo 45+1, Mastriani 66)
Rayo Zuliano (Ven) 0

Apr 24 – Montevideo
Danubio (Uru) 0
Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 1 (Madson 16)

Apr 24 – Caracas
Rayo Zuliano (Ven) 0
Sportivo Ameliano (Par) 4 (Valdez 35, 56, Contrera 45+2 pen, Martinich 60)

May 7 – Asuncion
S. Ameliano (Par) 2 (Valdez 35, Gonzalez 41)
Danubio (Uru) 1 (Ancheta 8)

May 8 – Caracas
Rayo Zuliano (Ven) 1 (Ochoa 63)
Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 5 (Esquivel 22, Mastriani 33, 37, Di Yorio 75 pen, Felipinho 81)

May 14 – Asuncion
Sportivo Ameliano (Par) 1 (Valdez 38)
Rayo Zuliano (Ven) 0

May 15 – Curitiba
Athletico Paranaense (Bra) 1 (Di Yorio 90+4)
Danubio (Uru) 2 (Pintos 29, Fernandez 42)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ath. Paranaense	5	4	0	1	17	4	12
S. Ameliano	5	3	1	1	8	5	10
Danubio	5	2	1	2	5	4	7
Rayo Zuliano	5	0	0	5	4	18	0

Group F

Apr 2 – Asuncion
Nacional (Par) 2 (Rivas 77, Arevalo 89)
Argentinos Juniors (Arg) 3 (Romero 29, 45+2, Lescano 41)

Apr 2 – Montevideo
Racing (Uru) 1 (Alaniz 85)
Corinthians (Bra) 1 (Yuri Alberto 69)

Apr 9 – Buenos Aires
Argentinos Juniors (Arg) 0
Racing (Uru) 3 (Veron Lupi 41, 48, Urretaviscaya 53)

Apr 9 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 4 (Romero 22, 73, Yuri Alberto 64, Pedro Raul 89)
Nacional (Par) 0

Apr 23 – Buenos Aires
Argentinos Juniors (Arg) 1 (Veron 2)
Corinthians (Bra) 0

Apr 25 – Asuncion
Nacional (Par) 2 (G. Caballero 36, Santacruz 69)
Racing (Uru) 2 (Veron Lupi 39, Rivero 78)

May 7 – Montevideo
Racing (Uru) 2 (Veron Lupi 20, De los Santos 27)
Argentinos Juniors (Arg) 1 (Gondou 32)

May 7 – Asuncion
Nacional (Par) 0
Corinthians (Bra) 2 (Yuri Alberto 75, Matheuzinho 90+6)

May 14 – Montevideo
Racing (Uru) 2 (Nandin 54, Bueno 64)
Nacional (Par) 1 (Bailone 53 pen)

May 14 – Sao Paulo
Corinthians (Bra) 4 (Yuri Alberto 9, 43, Wesley 41, Vera 90+2)
Argentinos Juniors (Arg) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Racing	5	3	2	0	10	5	11
Corinthians	5	3	1	1	11	2	10
Argentinos Juniors	5	2	0	3	5	11	6
Nacional	5	0	1	4	5	13	1

Group G

Apr 3 – Cuiaba
Cuiaba (Bra) 1 (Fernando Sobral 57)
Lanus (Arg) 1 (Lotti 80)

Apr 4 – Cusco
Deportivo Garcilaso (Per) 3 (Gentile 30, Erustes 63 pen, Gordillo 90+3)
Metropolitanos (Ven) 2 (Ortiz 25, 37)

Apr 11 – Caracas
Metropolitanos (Ven) 0
Cuiaba (Bra) 2 (Deyverson 4, 43 pen)

Apr 11 – Lanus
Lanus (Arg) 2 (Pena Biafore 26, Bou 63)
Deportivo Garcilaso (Per) 1 (Erustes 45+4)

Apr 23 – Cusco
Deportivo Garcilaso (Per) 1 (Beltra 76)
Cuiaba (Bra) 1 (Pitta 73)

Apr 25 – Caracas
Metropolitanos (Ven) 0
Lanus (Arg) 2 (Bou 29, 34)

May 8 – Cuiaba
Cuiaba (Bra) 3 (Fernando Sobral 39, Pitta 69, 83)
Metropolitanos (Ven) 0

May 9 – Cusco
Deportivo Garcilaso (Per) 0
Lanus (Arg) 2 (Bou 7, Moreno 54)

May 15 – Lanus
Lanus (Arg) 5 (Cuero 5 og, Bou 23, 55, Alvarez 52, Watson 76)
Metropolitanos (Ven) 0

May 15 – Cuiaba
Cuiaba (Bra) 1 (Fernando Sobral 72)
Deportivo Garcilaso (Per) 1 (Erustes 39)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lanus	5	4	1	0	12	2	13
Cuiaba	5	2	3	0	8	3	9
Dep. Garcilaso	5	1	2	2	6	8	5
Metropolitanos	5	0	0	5	2	15	0

Group H

Apr 3 – Braganca Paulista
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 1 (Vitinho 45+4)
Coquimbo Unido (Chi) 0

Apr 4 – Asuncion
Sportivo Luqueno (Par) 0
Racing (Arg) 2 (A. Martinez 41, R. Martinez 45)

Apr 10 – Avellaneda
Racing (Arg) 3 (Salas 2, A. Martinez 20, R. Martinez 90+2)
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 0

Apr 11 – Coquimbo
Coquimbo Unido (Chi) 1 (Chavez 15)
Sportivo Luqueno (Par) 0

Apr 24 – Coquimbo
Coquimbo Unido (Chi) 1 (Arias 43 og)
Racing (Arg) 2 (Solari 10, A. Martinez 45+5 pen)

Apr 24 – Braganca Paulista
RB Bragantino (Bra) 2 (Borbas 28, Gustavinho 47)
Sportivo Luqueno (Par) 1 (Ferreira 76)

May 8 – Asuncion
Sportivo Luqueno (Par) 0
Coquimbo Unido (Chi) 0

May 9 – Braganca Paulista
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 2 (Borbas 5, 7)
Racing (Arg) 1 (Solari 25)

May 16 – Avellaneda
Racing (Arg) 3 (A. Martinez 55 pen, 71, Nardoni 61)
Coquimbo Unido (Chi) 0

May 16 – Asuncion
S. Luqueno (Par) 2 (Ferreira 3, Leguizamon 37)
RB Bragantino (Bra) 3 (Helinho 15, 80, Lincoln 74)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Racing	5	4	0	1	11	3	12
RB Bragantino	5	4	0	1	8	7	12
Coquimbo Unido	5	1	1	3	2	6	4
S. Luqueno	5	0	1	4	3	8	1

ARGENTINA

Copa de la Liga Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
River Plate*	14	7	6	1	26	10	27
Argentinos Juniors*	14	7	5	2	25	14	26
Barracas Central*	14	7	5	2	20	15	26
Velez Sarsfield*	14	7	4	3	14	13	25
Talleres	14	6	6	2	24	16	24
Independiente	14	6	5	3	14	10	23
Instituto	14	5	2	7	18	17	17
Banfield	14	4	5	5	14	15	17
Huracan	14	4	4	6	12	12	16
Gimnasia y Esgrima	14	5	1	8	18	23	16
Rosario Central	14	4	3	7	10	18	15
Deportivo Riestra	14	3	4	7	8	16	13
Atletico Tucuman	14	1	7	6	8	23	10
Ind. Rivadavia	14	2	2	10	13	25	8

*Advance to the quarter-finals

Copa de la Liga Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Godoy Cruz*	14	9	2	3	16	6	29
Estudiantes*	14	8	3	3	19	9	27
Defensa y Justicia*	14	7	5	2	17	13	26
Boca Juniors*	14	7	4	3	20	12	25
Racing	14	7	3	4	24	11	24
Lanus	14	7	2	5	20	14	23
Newell's Old Boys	14	6	3	5	13	15	21
Union	14	5	5	4	16	14	20
Platense	14	4	6	4	10	14	18
San Lorenzo	14	3	7	4	10	14	16
Belgrano	14	3	5	6	19	21	14
Central Cordoba	14	2	5	7	10	20	11
Sarmiento	14	2	3	9	9	19	9
Tigre	14	1	2	11	7	25	5

*Advance to the quarter-finals

Quarter-Finals

Apr 20-21: Argentinos Juniors 1-1 Defensa y Justicia (*Argentinos Juniors win 3-2 on pens*); Estudiantes 3-0 Barracas Central; Godoy Cruz 1-2 Velez Sarsfield; River Plate 2-3 Boca Juniors

Semi-Finals

Apr 28-30: Argentinos Juniors 0-0 Velez Sarsfield (*Velez Sarsfield win 4-2 on pens*); Estudiantes 1-1 Boca Juniors (*Estudiantes win 3-1 on pens*)

Final

May 5: Estudiantes 1-1 Velez Sarsfield (*AET. Estudiantes win 4-3 on penalties*)

BOLIVIA

Apertura Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
The Strongest*	8	5	1	2	17	15	16
San Antonio Bulo Bulo*	8	4	2	2	15	7	14
Real Tomayapo	8	3	2	3	10	12	11
Real Santa Cruz	8	1	1	6	8	17	4

*Advance to the quarter-finals

Apertura Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Aurora*	8	4	2	2	14	7	14
Nacional Potosi*	8	4	2	2	13	11	14
Blooming	8	4	2	2	12	12	14
Royal Pari	8	2	2	4	7	10	8

*Advance to the quarter-finals

Apertura Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Universitario de Vinto*	8	4	2	2	8	7	14
Independiente Petrolero*	8	3	2	3	10	11	11
Guabira	8	3	1	4	12	11	10
Always Ready	8	1	3	4	6	10	6

*Advance to the quarter-finals

Apertura Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bolivar*	8	5	1	2	19	13	16
Gualberto Villarroel SJ*	8	3	2	3	12	14	11
Oriente Petrolero	8	3	1	4	9	13	10
Jorge Wilstermann	8	1	2	5	12	14	5

*Advance to the quarter-finals

Quarter-Finals

Apr 14-15: San Antonio Bulo Bulo 1-0 Bolivar; Gualberto Villarroel SJ 0-2 The Strongest; Nacional Potosi 0-1 Universitario de Vinto; Independiente Petrolero 0-1 Aurora
Apr 17-18: Universitario de Vinto 3-1 Nacional Potosi (agg 4-1); The Strongest 2-1 Gualberto Villarroel SJ (agg 4-1); Bolivar 1-1 San Antonio Bulo Bulo (agg 1-2); Aurora 2-3 Independiente Petrolero (agg 3-3, *I. Petrolero win 5-4 on pens)*

Semi-Finals

Apr 20-22: Universitario de Vinto 0-1 The Strongest; San Antonio Bulo Bulo 6-1 Independiente Petrolero
Apr 28: The Strongest 1-2 Universitario de Vinto (agg 2-2, *Universitario de Vinto win 9-8 on pens)*; Independiente Petrolero 3-1 San Antonio Bulo Bulo (agg 4-7)

Final

May 1:
Universitario de Vinto 1-2 San Antonio Bulo Bulo
May 5:
San Antonio Bulo Bulo 1-1 Universitario de Vinto (agg 3-2)
San Antonio Bulo Bulo advance to championship final to play Clausura winner

CONCACAF

2024 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS CUP

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 2 – Foxborough
New England Revolution (USA) 0
America (Mex) 4 (Martin 16, Zendejas 25, Calderon 64, Rodriguez 90+1)

Apr 2 – Columbus
Columbus Crew (USA) 1 (Rossi 43)
Tigres UANL (Mex) 1 (Gignac 18)

Apr 3 – SanJose
Herediano (Crc) 0
Pachuca (Mex) 5 (Rondon 3, 16, 68, Dominguez 55, Bautista 90)

Apr 3 – Fort Lauderdale
Inter Miami (USA) 1 (Aviles 19)
Monterrey (Mex) 2 (Meza 69, Rodriguez 89)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 9 – Mexico City
America (Mex) 5 (Valdes 21, Quinones 34, Martin 45+4, Zendejas 57, Rodriguez 76 pen)
New England Revolution (USA) 2 (Vrioni 65, 90+2)
America win 9-2 on aggregate

Apr 9 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL (Mex) 1 (Gignac 2)
Columbus Crew (USA) 1 (Rossi 59)
After Extra-Time. 2-2 on aggregate
Columbus Crew win 4-3 on penalties

Apr 10 – Pachuca
Pachuca (Mex) 2 (Gonzalez 47, Rondon 59)
Herediano (Crc) 1 (Rubio 62)
Pachuca win 7-1 on aggregate

Apr 10 – Guadalupe
Monterrey (Mex) 3 (Vazquez 31, Berterame 58, Gallardo 64)
Inter Miami (USA) 1 (Gomez 85)
Monterrey win 5-2 on aggregate

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 23 – Mexico City
America (Mex) 1 (Zendejas 12)
Pachuca (Mex) 1 (Micolta 40)

Apr 24 – Columbus
Columbus Crew (USA) 2 (Hernandez 25, Russell-Rowe 73)
Monterrey (Mex) 1 (Meza 58)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 30 – Pachuca
Pachuca (Mex) 2 (Rodriguez 12, Deossa 14)
America (Mex) 1 (Martin 23)
Pachuca win 3-2 on aggregate

May 1 – Guadalupe
Monterrey (Mex) 1 (Cheberko 11 og)
Columbus Crew (USA) 3 (Morris 45+4, Rossi 49, Russell-Rowe 89)
Columbus Crew win 5-2 on aggregate

ANTIGUA & BARBUDA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
All Saints United (C)	18	16	1	1	69	14	49
Grenades	18	16	1	1	63	15	49
Old Road	18	12	2	4	50	24	38
Aston Villa	18	10	3	5	42	26	33
Hoppers	18	9	2	7	41	50	29
Pigotts Bullets	18	7	5	6	32	28	26
Garden Stars	18	7	4	7	26	24	25
John Hughes	18	7	2	9	24	33	23
Green City	18	6	4	8	18	27	22
Willikies	18	4	6	8	29	40	18
Parham	18	3	6	9	22	41	15
Swetes	18	4	2	12	28	48	14
SAP	18	3	5	10	25	52	14
Ottos Rangers	18	2	7	9	20	35	13
Empire (R)	18	3	2	13	20	52	11
Tryum (R)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

BERMUDA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pembroke Hamilton (C)	18	14	2	2	40	14	44
North Village Rams	18	13	3	2	47	20	42
Devonshire Cougars	18	11	1	6	54	30	34
Hamilton Parish	18	7	5	6	37	30	26
Paget Lions	18	7	4	7	32	32	25
St George's Colts	18	6	5	7	31	34	23
Dandy Town Hornets	18	6	2	10	30	39	20
YMSC	18	5	3	10	25	43	18
Somerset Trojans (R)	18	4	3	11	24	39	15
X-Roads Warriors (R)	18	1	4	13	19	58	7

CAYMAN ISLANDS

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Scholars International (C)	14	9	3	2	41	15	30
345 FC	14	10	0	4	47	23	30
Bodden Town	14	8	5	1	33	16	29
Academy	14	7	1	6	36	24	22
Elite	14	6	3	5	32	17	21
Alliance	14	5	2	7	29	49	17
Roma United	14	3	1	10	23	44	10
Future	14	0	1	13	11	64	1

GUATEMALA

Clausura

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Municipal*	16	10	2	4	29	14	32
Antigua GFC*	16	10	2	4	25	12	32
Mixco*	16	8	3	5	18	10	27
Coban Imperial*	16	7	6	3	29	22	27
Comunicaciones*	16	6	5	5	16	17	23
Achuapa*	16	7	1	8	17	20	22
Xinabajul*	16	5	6	5	19	19	21
Malacateco*	16	6	3	7	21	26	21
Xelaju	16	5	5	6	14	15	20
Guastatoya	16	4	6	6	21	23	18
Deportivo Zacapa	16	2	5	9	12	25	11
Coatepeque	16	3	2	11	13	31	11

*Advance to the quarter-finals

Quarter-Finals

Apr 24-26: Achuapa 0-2 Mixco; Comunicaciones 1-0 Coban Imperial; Malacateco 3-2 Municipal; Xinabajul 0-1 Antigua GFC
Apr 27-29: Mixco 2-1 Achuapa (agg 4-1); Coban Imperial 0-2 Comunicaciones (agg 0-3); Municipal 4-0 Malacateco (agg 6-3); Antigua GFC 2-1 Xinabajul

Semi-Finals

May 1-3: Mixco 1-0 Antigua GFC; Comunicaciones 0-0 Municipal
May 5: Antigua GFC 1-1 Mixco (agg 1-2); Municipal 3-0 Comunicaciones (agg 3-0)

Final

May 11: Mixco 0-0 Municipal
May 19: Municipal 2-0 Mixco (agg 2-0)

JAMAICA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mount Pleasant*	26	18	5	3	37	15	59
Cavalier*	26	16	6	4	48	17	54
Tivoli Gardens**	26	15	6	5	51	23	51
Portmore United**	26	13	10	3	37	16	49
Arnett Gardens**	26	14	7	5	44	24	49
Waterhouse**	26	12	7	7	38	22	43
Montego Bay United	26	12	7	7	39	29	43
Dunbeholden	26	10	7	9	34	33	37
Vere United	26	7	6	13	27	36	27
Humble Lions	26	7	4	15	30	47	25
Molynes United	26	5	8	13	29	55	23
Harbour View	26	5	7	14	32	39	22
Treasure Beach (R)	26	3	4	19	17	52	13
Lime Hall Academy (R)	26	1	4	21	14	69	7

*Advance to semi-finals **Advance to play-offs

Play-Offs

Apr 22-23: Waterhouse 1-1 Tivoli Gardens; Arnett Gardens 1-1 Portmore United
Apr 29-30: Portmore United 0-1 Arnett Gardens (agg 1-2); Tivoli Gardens 0-2 Waterhouse (agg 1-3)

Semi-Finals

May 5-6: Arnett Gardens 1-1 Cavalier; Waterhouse 1-1 Mount Pleasant
May 12-13: Mount Pleasant 2-1 Waterhouse (agg 3-2); Cavalier 3-1 Arnett Gardens (agg 4-2)

Third-Place Play-Off

May 19: Waterhouse 1-5 Arnett Gardens

Final

May 20: Mount Pleasant 1-1 Cavalier (*Cavalier win 4-3 on penalties*)

MARTINIQUE

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Club Franciscain (C)	26	18	6	2	67	22	86
Samaritaine	26	16	8	2	49	19	82
Golden Lion*	26	18	2	6	71	32	81
Club Colonial	26	14	6	6	53	31	74
RC Saint Joseph**	26	14	5	7	44	26	71
Aiglon	26	13	5	8	49	26	70
Golden Star	26	11	7	8	46	39	66
Club Peleen	26	12	4	10	46	45	66
Case-Pilote	26	8	6	12	34	55	56
Diamantinoise	26	5	7	14	26	47	48
Riveraine	26	6	4	16	26	55	48
New Club (R)	26	4	6	16	24	49	44
Stade Spiritain (R)	26	4	3	19	25	66	41
Vauclinois (R)	26	3	3	20	25	73	38

Win = 4 points, Draw = 2 points, Loss = 1 point
*Deducted 1 point **Deducted 2 points

NICARAGUA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Diriangen*	18	14	2	2	43	12	44
Real Esteli*	18	10	5	3	33	13	35
Managua**	18	8	6	4	32	20	30
Deportivo Ocotal**	18	8	3	7	23	29	27
Walter Ferretti**	18	7	4	7	20	14	25
Municipal Jalapa**	18	7	4	7	20	25	25
Matagalpa	18	6	3	9	27	32	21
UNAN Managua	18	6	3	9	25	32	21
Sport Sebaco	18	4	6	8	25	40	18
Organica Masachapa	18	1	2	15	19	50	5

*Advance to semi-finals **Advance to play-offs

Play-Offs

May 2: Deportivo Ocotal 2-1 Walter Ferretti; Managua 2-3 Municipal Jalapa

Semi-Finals

May 4-5: Municipal Jalapa 0-2 Diriangen; Deportivo Ocotal 0-2 Real Esteli
May 9: Diriangen 1-0 Municipal Jalapa (agg 3-0); Real Esteli 5-1 Deportivo Ocotal (agg 7-1)

Final

May 13: Real Esteli 2-1 Diriangen
May 19: Diriangen 2-0 Real Esteli (agg 3-2)

ASIA

2023-24 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 17 – Al Ain
Al Ain (UAE) 4 (Rahimi 6, 26 pen, 38 pen, Kaku 56 pen)
Al Hilal (KSA) 2 (Malcom 49, S. Al Dawsari 78)

Apr 17 – Ulsan
Ulsan (Kor) 1 (Lee Dong-gyeong 19)
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 23 – Riyadh
Al Hilal (KSA) 2 (Neves 4 pen, S. Al Dawsari 51)
Al Ain (UAE) 1 (Erik 12)
Al Ain win 5-4 on aggregate

Apr 24 – Yokohama
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 3 (Uenaka 13, 30, Anderson Lopes 21)
Ulsan (Kor) 2 (Matheus Sales 35, Bojanic 42 pen)
After Extra-Time. 3-3 on aggregate
Yokohama F. Marinos win 5-4 on penalties

Final – 1st Leg

May 11 – Yokohama
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 2 (Uenaka 72, Watanabe 84)
Al Ain (UAE) 1 (Al Baloushi 12)

Final – 2nd Leg

May 25 – Al Ain
Al Ain (UAE) 5 (Rahimi 8, 67, Kaku 33 pen, Laba 90+1, 90+5)
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 1 (Yan Matheus 40)
Al Ain win 6-3 on aggregate

2023-24 AFC CUP

Inter-Zone Final

Apr 17: Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kgz) 1-1 Central Coast Mariners (Aus)
Apr 24: Central Coast Mariners (Aus) 3-0 Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kgz) (agg 4-1)

West Zone Final

Apr 16: Al Ahed (Lbn) 1-0 Al Nahda (Oma)
Apr 23:
Al Nahda (Oma) 2-2 Al Ahed (Lbn) (agg 2-3)

Final

May 5:
Al Ahed (Lbn) 0-1 Central Coast Mariners (Aus)

BAHRAIN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Khalidiya (C)	22	12	8	2	45	18	44
Al Riffa	22	10	7	5	35	26	37
Muharraq	22	9	10	3	40	28	37
Al Ahli	22	9	6	7	32	30	33
Manama	22	9	6	7	28	26	33
Al Najma	22	7	6	9	40	42	27
Al Shabab	22	7	6	9	28	33	27
Sitra	22	5	11	6	29	33	26
Al Hidd*	22	6	8	8	29	33	26
East Riffa*	22	6	8	8	27	29	26
Al Hala (R)	22	6	2	14	17	41	20
Busaiteen (R)	22	4	6	12	26	37	18

*Enter relegation play-offs with Al Ittihad & Malkiya

CAMBODIA

Regular Season

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Svay Rieng*	27	22	3	2	73	30	69
Phnom Penh Crown*	27	20	4	3	63	30	64
Visakha*	27	14	2	11	53	40	44
Boeung Ket*	27	11	8	8	62	48	41
National Defense	27	12	3	12	46	39	39
Dangkor Senchey	27	10	4	13	43	55	34
NagaWorld	27	7	9	11	36	49	30
Prey Veng	27	6	5	16	45	62	23
Kirivong Sok Sen Chey	27	5	5	17	34	62	20
Angkor Tiger (R)	27	5	3	19	35	75	18

*Advance to championship round

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Svay Rieng (C)	30	24	4	2	83	33	76
Phnom Penh Crown	30	21	5	4	69	33	68
Visakha	30	15	3	12	57	46	48
Boeung Ket	30	11	9	10	64	58	42

INDIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mohun Bagan*	22	15	3	4	47	26	48
Mumbai City*	22	14	5	3	42	19	47
Goa**	22	13	6	3	39	21	45
Odisha**	22	11	6	5	35	23	39
Kerala Blasters**	22	10	3	9	32	31	33
Chennaiyin**	22	8	3	11	26	36	27
NorthEast United	22	6	8	8	30	34	26
Punjab	22	6	6	10	28	35	24
East Bengal	22	6	6	10	27	29	24
Bengaluru	22	5	7	10	20	34	22
Jamshedpur	22	5	6	11	27	32	21
Hyderabad	22	1	5	16	10	43	8?

*Advance to semi-finals **Advance to play-offs

Play-Offs

Apr 19-20: Odisha 2-1 Kerala Blasters (*AET*); Goa 2-1 Chennaiyin

Semi-Finals

Apr 23-24: Odisha 2-1 Mohun Bagan; Goa 2-3 Mumbai City
Apr 28-29: Mohun Bagan 2-0 Odisha (agg 3-2); Mumbai City 2-0 Goa (agg 5-2)

Final

May 4: Mohun Bagan 1-3 Mumbai City

QATAR

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Sadd (C)	22	15	4	3	65	21	49
Al Rayyan	22	15	2	5	50	26	47
Al Gharafa	22	13	5	4	53	36	44
Al Wakrah	22	11	5	6	40	30	38
Al Arabi	22	7	8	7	42	38	29
Al Duhail	22	8	4	10	42	45	28
Umm Salal	22	7	7	8	32	37	28
Qatar SC	22	7	4	11	39	47	25
Al Shamal	22	6	7	9	28	37	25
Al Ahli	22	7	2	13	37	58	23
Al Markhiya* (R)	22	5	3	14	20	50	18
Muaither (R)	22	3	5	14	34	57	14

Lost 3-1 to Al Shahaniya in relegation play-off

SYRIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Futuwa (C)	22	15	4	3	31	10	49
Jableh	22	11	7	4	29	10	40
Tishreen	22	11	7	4	24	15	40
Hottin	22	11	5	6	28	18	38
Al Ittihad Ahli Aleppo	22	10	7	5	35	27	37
Al Karama	22	7	11	4	22	17	32
Wathba	22	5	11	6	17	18	26
Al Jaish	22	7	5	10	28	29	26
Al Taliya	22	7	4	11	13	29	25
Al Wahda	22	6	6	10	19	24	24
Al Sahel (R)	22	3	5	14	16	36	14
Horriya (R)	22	2	2	18	16	45	8

AFRICA

2023-24 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Mar 29 – Dar es Salaam
Simba (Tan) 0
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (Koka 4)

Mar 30 – Lubumbashi
TP Mazembe (Cod) 0
Petro Atletico (Ang) 0

Mar 30 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 0
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 0

Mar 30 – Dar es Salaam
Young Africans (Tan) 0
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 5 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 2 (El Solia 47, Kahraba 90+9 pen)
Simba (Tan) 0
Al Ahly win 3-0 on aggregate

Apr 5 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0
Young Africans (Tan) 0
0-0 on aggregate. M. Sundowns win 3-2 on pens

Apr 6 – Luanda
Petro Atletico (Ang) 1 (Toro 29)
TP Mazembe (Cod) 2 (Kinzumbi 82, Beya 90+6)
TP Mazembe win 2-1 on aggregate

Apr 6 – Abidjan
ASEC Abidjan (Civ) 0
Esperance (Tun) 0
0-0 on aggregate. Esperance win 3-2 on pens

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Apr 20 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Sasse 41)
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0

Apr 20 – Lubumbashi
TP Mazembe (Cod) 0
Al Ahly (Egy) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Apr 26 – Pretoria
Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 0
Esperance (Tun) 1 (Bouchniba 57)
Esperance win 2-0 on aggregate

Apr 26 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 3 (Abdelmonem 68, Abou Ali 83, Tawfik 90+12)
TP Mazembe (Cod) 0
Al Ahly win 3-0 on aggregate

Final – 1st Leg

May 18 – Tunis
Esperance (Tun) 0
Al Ahly (Egy) 0

Final– 2nd Leg

May 25 – Cairo
Al Ahly (Egy) 1 (Aholou 4 og)
Esperance (Tun) 0
Al Ahly win 1-0 on aggregate

2023-24 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Quarter-Finals

Mar 31: Modern Future (Egy) 1-2 Zamalek (Egy); Abu Salim (Lby) 0-0 RS Berkane (Mar); Rivers United (Nga) 1-0 USM Alger (Alg); Stade Malien (Mli) 1-2 Dreams FC (Gha)
Apr 7: Zamalek (Egy) 1-1 Modern Future (Egy) (agg 3-2); RS Berkane (Mar) 3-2 Abu Salim (Lby) (agg 3-2); USM Alger (Alg) 2-0 Rivers United (Nga) (agg 2-1); Dreams FC (Gha) 1-1 Stade Malien (Mli) (agg 3-2)

Semi-Finals

Apr 21: USM Alger (Alg) 0-3 w/o RS Berkane (Mar); Zamalek (Egy) 0-0 Dreams FC (Gha)
Apr 28: RS Berkane (Mar) 3-0 w/o USM Alger (Alg) (agg 6-0 w/o); Dreams FC (Gha) 0-3 Zamalek (Egy) (agg 0-3)

Final

May 12: RS Berkane (Mar) 2-1 Zamalek (Egy)
May 19: Zamalek (Egy) 1-0 RS Berkane (Mar) (agg 2-2, *Zamalek win on away goals*)

BURUNDI

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Vital'O (C)	30	22	6	2	52	11	72
Flambeau du Centre	30	21	6	3	51	18	69
Musongati	30	18	6	6	41	16	60
Rukinzo	30	18	3	9	50	32	57
Aigle Noir	30	16	5	9	39	26	53
Le Messager Ngozi	30	15	7	8	40	28	52
Olympic Star	30	11	12	7	36	25	45
Bumamuru	30	12	8	10	46	34	44
Dynamik	30	9	9	12	46	50	36
LLB Amasipiri	30	8	9	13	29	35	33
Moso Sugar	30	7	10	13	29	37	31
Kayanza United	30	7	7	16	29	44	28
Inter Star	30	7	6	17	26	47	27
Telaviv (R)	30	7	5	18	32	66	26
Tigre Noir (R)	30	6	7	17	18	37	25
Magara Young Boys (R)	30	2	2	26	25	83	8

LIBERIA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Watanga (C)	26	18	7	1	54	14	61
BEA Mountain	26	14	6	6	43	29	48
LISCR	26	15	3	8	36	27	48
Mighty Barrolle	26	14	5	7	49	29	47
Heaven Eleven	26	13	7	6	65	45	46
Paynesville	26	13	5	8	63	41	44
Global Pharma	26	11	4	11	30	34	37
LPRC Oilers	26	7	10	9	40	43	31
Invincible Eleven	26	7	9	10	26	35	30
Kallon Liberia	26	8	6	12	40	58	30
Freeport	26	7	8	11	34	46	29
Nimba Kwado (R)	26	7	7	12	27	40	28
Cece United (R)	26	5	5	16	31	44	20
NPA Anchors (R)	26	1	2	23	22	75	5

RWANDA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
APR (C)	30	19	11	0	47	17	68
Rayon Sports	30	17	6	7	42	25	57
Musanze	30	16	5	9	34	24	53
Mukura	30	13	8	9	39	32	47
AS Kigali	30	12	9	9	26	25	45
Kiyovu Sports	30	11	11	8	38	33	44
Police	30	12	3	15	35	34	39
Amagaju	30	10	9	11	30	31	39
Gasogi United	30	10	6	14	31	34	36
Gorilla	30	9	8	13	26	33	35
Marine	30	9	8	13	32	42	35
Muhazi United	30	7	12	11	21	29	33
Bugesera	30	7	11	12	37	36	32
Etincelles	30	8	8	14	35	44	32
Sunrise (R)	30	9	5	16	25	40	32
Etoile de l'Est (R)	30	9	4	17	20	39	31

SEYCHELLES

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saint Louis (C)	18	13	2	3	35	18	41
Foresters	18	10	5	3	37	21	35
Lightstars	18	9	4	5	32	27	31
La Passe	18	8	4	6	29	32	28
St Michel United	18	7	5	6	35	27	26
Cote d'Or	18	7	3	8	31	29	24
Anse Reunion	18	6	2	10	21	24	20
Bazar Brothers	18	4	7	7	24	30	19
Northern Dynamo	18	4	3	11	29	41	15
Red Star (R)	18	2	5	11	14	38	11

OCEANIA

2024 OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Group A

May 11 – Paea
Rewa (Fij) 2 (Sela 62, 65)
Auckland City (Nzl) 2 (Howieson 50, De Vries 67)

May 11 – Paea
Solomon Warriors (Sol) 0
Hekari United (PNG) 2 (Kepo 70, Naime 82)

May 14 – Paea
Auckland City (Nzl) 1 (Gillion 90+3)
Hekari United (PNG) 0

May 14 – Paea
Solomon Warriors (Sol) 2 (Feni 15, 72)
Rewa (Fij) 3 (Hughes 40, Kautoga 45, Sela 70)

May 17 – Paea
Hekari United (PNG) 2 (Joe 55 pen, Rani 62)
Rewa (Fij) 3 (Kautoga 41, 74, Waranaivalu 90)

May 17 – Paea
Auckland City (Nzl) 5 (Manickum 40, 49, 61 pen, Ukich 66 pen, De Vries 75)
Solomon Warriors (Sol) 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Auckland City (Q)	3	2	1	0	8	2	7
Rewa (Q)	3	2	1	0	8	6	7
Hekari United	3	1	0	2	4	4	3
Solomon Warriors	3	0	0	3	2	10	0

Group B

May 12 – Pirae
Pirae (Tah) 6 (Tau 9, Tepa 41, Labaste 47, 73 pen, Ngiamba 67, Tihoni 83)
Vaivase-Tai (Sam) 0

May 15 – Pirae
AS Magenta (Ncl) 8 (Haewegene 9, 12, 37, 45, 48, Gope 45, Kugogne 51, Brunet 87)
Vaivase-Tai (Sam) 0

May 16 – Pirae
Pirae (Tah) 5 (Tihoni 10, Tave 14, Labaste 52, 63, Tau 72)
Ifira Black Bird (Van) 1 (Iawak 27)

May 18 – Pirae
Vaivase-Tai (Sam) 1 (Leiataua 55)
Ifira Black Bird (Van) 5 (Spokeyjack 8, 28, Kalotang 20, Tenene 22, Thomas 87)

May 18 – Pirae
AS Magenta (Ncl) 0
Pirae (Tah) 0

May 20 – Pirae
Ifira Black Bird (Van) 1 (Walone 43 og)
AS Magenta (Ncl) 2 (Wanemut 39 og, Luepack 90+1)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pirae (Q)	3	2	1	0	11	1	7
AS Magenta (Q)	3	2	1	0	10	1	7
Ifira Black Bird	3	1	0	2	7	8	3
Vaivase-Tai	3	0	0	3	1	19	0

Semi-Finals

May 22 – Pirae
Auckland City (Nzl) 1 (Ukich 66)
AS Magenta (Ncl) 0

May 22 – Pirae
Pirae (Tah) 4 (Ngiamba 90 pen, 90+6 pen, Tepa 98, Drova og 111)
Rewa (Fij) 2 (Joseph 35 pen, Kautoga 90+8)
After Extra-Time

Final

May 24 – Pirae
Auckland City (Nzl) 4 (Den Heijer 6, Gillion 30, Ukich 48, Gray 59)
Pirae (Tah) 0

TAHITI

Championship Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Pirae (C)	10	9	0	1	37	14	37
Venus	10	7	1	2	24	14	32
Tefana	10	6	1	3	29	13	29
Dragon	10	3	1	6	19	22	20
Central	10	2	2	6	15	40	18
Punaruu	10	0	1	9	11	32	11

Win = 4 points, Draw = 2 points, Loss = 1 point

Relegation Round

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Taiarapu	10	7	2	1	35	15	33
Jeunes Tahitiens	10	5	3	2	40	28	28
Temanava*	10	6	1	3	39	17	28
Pueu*	10	5	1	4	26	20	25
Papenoo**	10	3	0	7	20	40	19
Olympic Mahina (R)	10	0	1	9	10	50	11

Win = 4 points, Draw = 2 points, Loss = 1 point
**Deducted 1 point **Enter relegation play-off*

Internationals

UNDER-23 ASIAN CUP

Group A

Apr 15: Australia 0-0 Jordan; Qatar 2-0 Indonesia
Apr 18: Indonesia 1-0 Australia; Jordan 1-2 Qatar
Apr 21: Qatar 0-0 Australia; Jordan 1-4 Indonesia

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Qatar (Q)	3	2	1	0	4	1	7
Indonesia (Q)	3	2	0	1	5	3	6
Australia	3	0	2	1	0	1	2
Jordan	3	0	1	2	2	6	1

Group B

Apr 16: Japan 1-0 China; South Korea 1-0 UAE
Apr 19: China 0-2 South Korea; UAE 0-2 Japan
Apr 22: UAE 1-2 China; Japan 0-1 South Korea

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
South Korea (Q)	3	3	0	0	4	0	9
Japan (Q)	3	2	0	1	3	1	6
China	3	1	0	2	2	4	3
UAE	3	0	0	3	1	5	0

Group C

Apr 16: Iraq 0-2 Thailand; S. Arabia 4-2 Tajikistan
Apr 19: Thailand 0-5 S. Arabia; Tajikistan 2-4 Iraq
Apr 22: Thailand 0-1 Tajikistan; S. Arabia 1-2 Iraq

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iraq (Q)	3	2	0	1	6	5	6
Saudi Arabia (Q)	3	2	0	1	10	4	6
Tajikistan	3	1	0	2	5	8	3
Thailand	3	1	0	2	2	6	3

Group D

Apr 17: Uzbekistan 2-0 Malaysia; Vietnam 3-1 Kuwait
Apr 20: Malaysia 0-2 Vietnam; Kuwait 0-5 Uzbekistan
Apr 23: Kuwait 2-1 Malaysia; Uzbekistan 3-0 Vietnam

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Uzbekistan (Q)	3	3	0	0	10	0	9
Vietnam (Q)	3	2	0	1	5	4	6
Kuwait	3	1	0	2	3	9	3
Malaysia	3	0	0	3	1	6	0

Quarter-Finals

Apr 25: Qatar 2-4 Japan (*AET*); South Korea 2-2 Indonesia (*AET, Indonesia win 11-10 on pens*)
Apr 26:
Uzbekistan 2-0 Saudi Arabia; Iraq 1-0 Vietnam

Semi-Finals

Apr 29:
Indonesia 0-2 Uzbekistan; Japan 2-0 Iraq
Uzbekistan and Japan qualify for 2024 Summer Olympics

Third-Place Play-Off

May 2: Iraq 2-1 Indonesia (*AET*)
Iraq qualify for 2024 Summer Olympics

Final

May 3: Japan 1-0 Uzbekistan

2024 SUMMER OLYMPICS QUALIFIER

AFC-CAF Play-Off

May 9: Indonesia 0-1 Guinea
Guinea qualify for 2024 Summer Olympics

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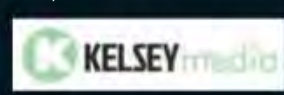

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Harry Kane

England 2 Denmark 1 (aet)

Euro 2020 semi-finals, Wembley

When Harry Kane reflects on his career thus far, he does so with a tinge of regret. As England's all-time record goalscorer prepares to captain his country at the Euro 2024 finals, he looks back on the biggest games he's played in...

Euro finalists... Kane celebrates the Euro 2020 semi-final victory over Denmark

"I've been lucky enough to play in the Champions League final and a major final for England at the Euros, but they didn't end as I would have wanted.

When you get that close to something special, it is hard to come away and not get over the line and that may be why I look at other matches in my career as being the most memorable. It's hard to pin it down to one match and I'd probably pick out three.

The first would be my England debut, at home to Lithuania, as I scored so soon after coming on. You dream about playing for England at Wembley when you are growing up and when it happens, it doesn't feel real. I remember going on for Wayne Rooney and the goal arrived almost straightaway. It was more than I could ever have dreamt about and even now when I think about it, you get that feeling inside. It will always be a moment that is really special for me.

The second match I would pick out would be the day I broke the Tottenham goalscoring record. Jimmy Greaves was an incredible player and when you have been at a club for as long as I was at Tottenham, you understand what a player like that means to the fans and the history books, so to break his all-time scoring record was amazing. It was against Manchester City, in February 2023, and it was a special feeling.

We had been speaking about it for a long time before it happened and it was almost like a countdown every time I scored a goal and got closer, so it was nice to finally get it done. I met Jimmy before he died and also his family, who were fantastic with me, so it was a massive honour to break a record set by someone as legendary as that.

The third match I'd pick out was the Euro 2020 semi-final against Denmark at Wembley. England have got so close so many times in major tournaments and we've come up short in the semi-finals, but this felt different. It was at Wembley, we had been building towards it and when you win and the way we did it after a dramatic game, it was very special.

Match-winner... Kane converts the rebound after his penalty is saved

Obviously, losing the final against Italy was so tough because it felt like it was our time, but we know this England team has massive potential and we have to try again this summer in the Euros. Playing in major tournaments for England is massive for me and I'm fortunate to have been in a few of them now. To do it in front of our own fans made it even better, but we all want to go one better now and win a big tournament. We know we are close and it's just a case of getting to a final and winning it.

International tournaments are decided by fine margins and we have come out on the wrong end on a few occasions in my time with England. Hopefully we find a way to go one better in the Euros this summer."

> "When you get that close to something special, it is hard to come away and not get over the line"

Interview by Kevin Palmer for Our Pure Planet

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